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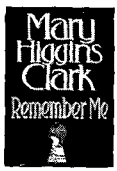

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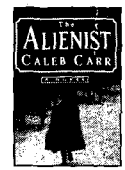

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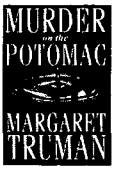

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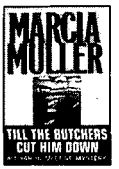

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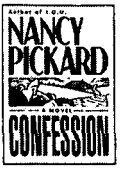

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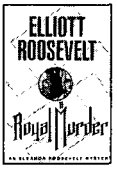

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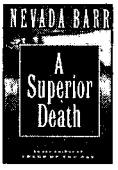

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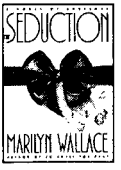

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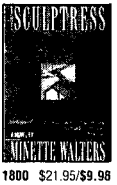

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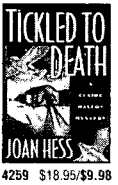

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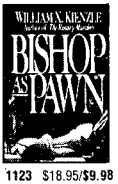

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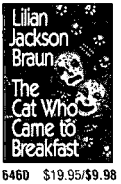

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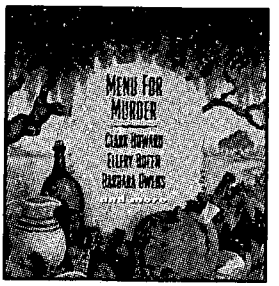

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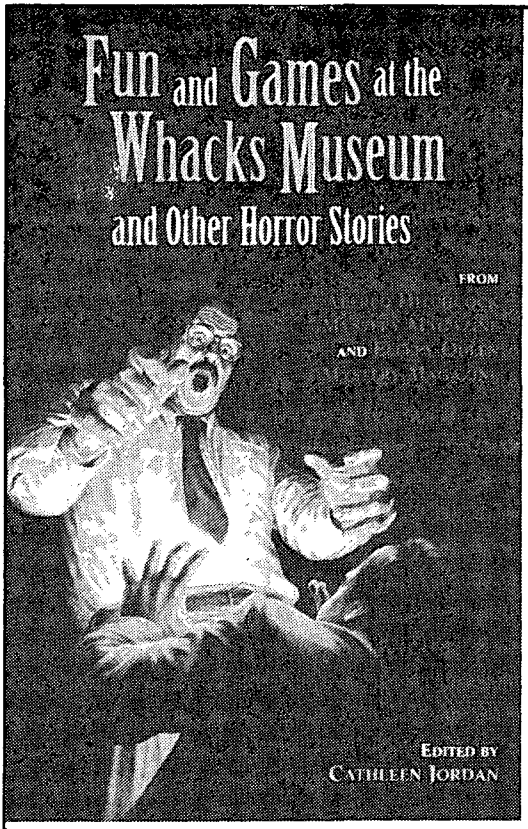

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Besides being one of the most celebrated short story writers in the crime field, Clark Howard is a man with a deep commitment to encouraging others to work in the form. This year's short story contests sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America are his brainchildren, and he has been tireless in getting the word out to new writers that they should submit their work. Hats off to Clark Howard!

SPLIT DECISIONS

by CLARK HOWARD

Roy Britt was sitting in the doorway drinking milk from a carton when old Rainey arrived to open the poolroom.

"No work on the docks this morning?" Rainey asked. He was an old black man with cotton tufts for hair and a face like shiny saddle leather.

"Ice storm up in the Midwest," Roy said, standing. "Lot of the big rigs are waiting for the interstates to be cleared, I guess. They didn't put on no day help at all this morning."

"Come on in, then," Rainey said, unlocking the front door. "You can sweep the floor and brush down the tables."

"Okay. Thanks, Rainey."

Rainey did not acknowledge the thanks as he led Roy into the stale, musty air of the poolroom and began turning on lights. Roy finished his milk and tossed the carton into a trash can. He was a middleweight, slightly over the one-sixty limit, with scar tissue along the flesh just under each eyebrow. With a twenty-and-fourteen record, he had other scars too, some that showed, some that didn't. He hadn't had a fight in eight months, which was why he showed

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up at the docks every morning to try for day work unloading trucks.

"Start with the floor, let's get these stinking cigarette butts out of here," Rainey told him, unlocking an old brass National cash register and checking his drawer of starter cash. As Roy got a broom out of the utility closet, Rainey asked, "You in the mood for Wingy or Bix this morning?"

"Wingy sounds good," Roy replied.

Finishing with the register, Rainey turned to an old, beat-up hi-fi record player behind the counter and put on a 78 rpm of "St. James Infirmary" as written by W. C. Handy and rendered by Wingy Manone, a cornet player from right here in New Orleans who had lost an arm as a kid when he was run over by a streetcar named Burgundy. He had gone on to become a world-class Dixieland musician anyway.

As the achy blues of the number wafted in the dingy poolroom, Roy Britt closed his fighter's hands around the broom handle and began to sweep.

It was almost ten when the phone rang and Rainey turned from a racing form he was studying to answer it. "Pool hall."

Roy was at a back table, slowly dragging a soft-bristled brush across the green felt of the playing field. It pleased him to see how he could work the nap into a smooth, even texture completely devoid of fuzz or roughness that might throw a good shot off a thirty-second of an inch. As he worked, he heard the soft *click-click* of pool balls from another table where a hustler named Bumper was practicing with a custom stick. Backing that sound was another Dixieland record Rainey had put on. Everything considered, Roy liked the poolroom. There was something warm and cozy about it, like the locker rooms in some athletic clubs where he'd boxed as a kid. Seedy, shabby, but homey too.

"Okay, I'll tell him," Roy heard Rainey say into the phone. The old black man hung up and shuffled back to where Roy was and said quietly, "Jack Kono wants to see you." He squinted suspiciously. "You ain't in no trouble, are you?"

"Not that I know of," Roy replied.

"Why Jack Kono sending for you, den?"

"Maybe he's got a fight for me," Roy said. "He's been putting together some matches for Legion Hall."

"If he wanted you for a fight, how come he didn't say so?" Rainey wanted to know.

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Roy shrugged. "Who knows? Kono's got Cajun in him. They don't think like you and me." He picked some lint off the brush he was using. "Where does he want to see me?"

"Blue Creole at noon. He eatin' lunch there."

Nodding, Roy resumed brushing down the table. Old Rainey shuffled away, muttering, "Sho' hope you ain't in no trouble with Jack Kono."

When he finished the tables, Roy left the poolroom and walked down Canal Street to Sam's 24-Hour Grill. Sam, a rail-thin man with jailhouse tattoos on both forearms, was behind the counter filling salt shakers. "Hey, Roy," he said, bobbing his chin. "Benny's in the kitchen."

"Hey, Sam. Thanks."

Back in the kitchen, slicing tomatoes, was a young woman who would have had a drop-dead figure if she'd been twelve pounds lighter, but with the extra weight was kind of roundy. She had freckles that started at her hairline and, when she was dressed, disappeared between her breasts. When she was undressed, they didn't disappear at all. Her hair was a reddish color that Crayola hadn't named yet.

"Hi, baby," she said as Roy walked in.

"Verbenia, you don't owe no money to Jack Kono, do you?" Roy asked without preliminary.

"Lord, no." She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "You know I don't borrow at street rates. Why?"

"He wants to see me."

"Jack Kono?"

"Yeah. I thought maybe you run short of money or something without telling me."

"Well, think again."

"You haven't been betting the dogs or nothing, have you?"

"Roy." She stopped slicing and put one fist on her hip, the thin-bladed knife still in it. "Read my lips. I said I haven't borrowed from none of Jack Kono's loan sharks. Period." She resumed slicing. "Did you go see about that job? In the ad I cut out?"

Roy looked down at the tomatoes. "I was going to, but then I got the message that Kono wanted to see me, an' I thought if you didn't owe him nothing, then maybe he had a fight for me or something—"

Benny stopped slicing again, her eyes becoming weary and knowing at the same time. "Roy, I thought we agreed you'd give up

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fighting and find a regular steady job so maybe you and me and Sugar can get out of the Quarter, move out to that new tract by the airport—"

"I know," he said. "But I got to see what Kono wants first, don't I? What do you want me to do, ignore the man, Verbenia?"

"Roy," she asked impatiently, "why can't you call me 'Benny' like ever'body else does? Why do you insist on calling me 'Verbenia'?"

Roy shrugged. "I like 'Verbenia.' I think it's pretty."

Benny shook her head in exasperation. "Well, I wish you could have knowed my daddy. Y'all would have got on real fine. Only two people in the world ever liked the name 'Verbenia.' " She pointed the slicing knife at the door. "Go on, get out of here; I got to finish getting ready for the lunch crowd."

"Okay. I'm gonna run home and put on my good shirt."

"Look around the neighborhood for Sugar while you're there," Benny said. "I got a feeling she's ditching school again."

"Okay. See you later." Roy kissed her on the cheek and sneaked in a quick feel of one thickset breast.

"Oh, stop it—"

"Bye," he said, going out the back door, "Verbenia."

They had a kitchenette apartment in a horseshoe-shaped building that had once been a high-class brothel in the days when customers arrived by carriage. There was still a long pole in front where the horses had been tethered. The courtyard was cobblestone set by slaves, and in its time had been a vine-covered and magnolia-filled place of gas-lit shadows, full of strange, alluring aromas that conjured up visions of the flesh, and fleeting glimpses of mysterious women behind numbered doors. That courtyard now, as Roy Britt walked briskly across it, was a dead, trash-littered place, uninviting and dreary by day, unlighted and dangerous by night.

When he let himself in, Roy found Sugar sprawled in front of the television, spreading mayonnaise on bread while she watched with riveted eleven-year-old eyes some dreadful horror special effects on the screen before her.

"Hey, Roy," she said, with only a glance.

"Hey, Sugar. What you watching?"

"*Vampire Vixens of Venus*. What you doing home?"

"Changing shirts." He was already at the creaky chifforobe the three of them shared, unbuttoning his denim work shirt and replacing it with a wine-colored Western sport shirt with fake pearl buttons that Benny had given him for Christmas.

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Now Sugar tore her eyes away from the television. This was not part of the regular drill around here. "What are you putting on your good shirt in daytime for? You only wear that shirt at night when you and Mama go out drinking."

"I'm going to see a man about some work," Roy said. He bobbed his chin at the television. "What's she doing to that poor guy?"

"Sucking his blood out through his thumb. It's called erotic horror. What kind of work?"

"A fight maybe."

"Really?" Her young face showed excitement. It was a face totally different from her mother's, with a café au lait complexion, light blue albino eyes, and tightly wired pitch-black hair that curled in a cluster on her head like a skullcap. "Who are you gonna fight?"

"Don't know. Not even sure that's what it's about."

Sugar sat up, cross-legged, still spreading mayonnaise. "I'd like to see you rematched with Sonny Boy Newton. I still think you whipped him that night. The judges giving him a split decision really sucked."

Roy shrugged. "Could've gone either way, I guess. I thought I whipped him too. I really hate split decisions, you know? People think, hey, it's the best way to lose, because it was so close, one judge for you, two judges for the other guy. But it's really the worst way to lose, 'cause you know you came so near to winning. Makes you mad at yourself for not trying harder. I really hate split decisions." Roy was looking at himself in a yellow-stained mirror on the chifforobe door. He was twenty-and-fourteen, and six of his fourteen losses had been split decisions. For a while, a few years back, they had even introduced him as "Roy 'Hard Luck Kid' Britt."

"You'll kick his ass next time, Roy," said Sugar.

"You watch your language," he chastised. " 'Member, you're a young lady." Roy knelt next to her and took a bite of the mayonnaised bread. "Stay off the streets until after school's out," he cautioned. From his pocket he pulled several crumpled dollar bills and gave her one. "See you later, Sugar."

"See you later, Roy," she said, and turned back to the television.

One got to the Blue Creole Cafe by entering a dark, damp passageway off Decatur Street and following it to an alley, then crossing the alley and going through a rusty wrought-iron gate and down a few cement stairs to a forbidding-looking metal fire door with a spring-hinged knocker on it. One could only enter by membership

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or invitation; it was a place where the bankers and other businessmen of respectable New Orleans took their secretaries and mistresses to lunch or dinner before going to bed somewhere for an hour or two.

When the door was opened for Roy Britt, he said to a massive black doorman who looked like Sonny Liston reincarnated, "I'm here to see Jack Kono."

"He ax you to come?"

"Yeah."

At a nod of the black man's head, Roy entered and was left waiting in an alcove furnished with several expensively upholstered love seats arranged under ornately framed prints of partly nude Tahitian women originally painted by Gauguin. A nervous young blond woman sat on one of the love seats, her knees pressed closely together, worrying the strap of her cheap purse.

She wouldn't be carrying a cheap purse much longer, Roy thought. He leaned on the wall as far away from her as he could, so as not to make her any more nervous about her rendezvous than she already was.

The black doorman returned after a moment and nodded for Roy to follow him. He led Roy through a dining room of private, draped booths and secluded tables concealed by large potted plants and folding screens. Roy noticed that the understated music backgrounding the room was the same kind Rainey played in the poolroom: the softer, slower Dixieland. At a back booth, with the drapes open, Jack Kono sat eating crab cakes and drinking Pouilly-Fuissé.

"Sit down, Roy," he said, bobbing his chin at the opposite bench. "You want to eat?"

"I ate early, thanks," Roy lied. For some reason his stomach had suddenly knotted up. Jack Kono frequently had that effect on people. He had reptilian eyes in an otherwise softly Cajun face, very white, hairless hands, and a reputation for easy murder. There were some who referred to him as the anti-Christ of the French Quarter. No one, it was said, had ever successfully lied to him.

"I need you to do something for me, Roy," said Kono. "You know my baby sister Angela?"

"Seen her around," said Roy. "Don't really know her."

"Well, I'm having a problem with her. She turned eighteen a few months ago and she's getting unruly on me. Quit the private school I had her going to, moved out of our mother's house, got a job as a shoe clerk." Kono stared at a bite of crab cake, sighed quietly, and

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shook his head. "I've tried talking some sense into her head but she won't listen. Says she's a grown woman—" he grunted softly, "a grown woman at *eighteen,* can you imagine?"

Roy shrugged. What the hell did this have to do with a fight for him, he wondered.

"I recently," Kono continued as he chewed, "found out she's running around with a guy named Denny Boyle: he's a shanty Irish auto mechanic at a place called Sports Car Heaven across the river in Gretna. You happen to know the guy?"

Roy shook his head. "No."

"I didn't think it was likely you did. I had him checked out and as far as I can tell, nobody really knows the guy. He came down from Birmingham a year or so ago and went to work tuning sports car engines. Customizes cars on the side. Apparently wants to save some money and open his own custom shop some day. A real yokel, right?"

Roy shrugged and looked away. He wished now that he'd gone to answer the ad Verbenia had cut out for him instead of going to the poolroom and getting Kono's message.

"This Denny Boyle is not the kind of guy I want my sister running around with, know what I mean?" Kono said. "He's strictly a dirt-under-the-fingernails type, no class, no future. I want him to stop seeing Angela."

Roy nodded resignedly. No fight at the Legion Hall, he guessed. "You want me to have a talk with him, is that it?"

Kono smiled a barren smile. "If I thought talking would solve the problem, I'd do it myself, Roy."

"So what do you want?"

"I want the guy worked over. But not by hooligans. I don't want it to look to Angela like it was arranged. I want the guy to get in a street fight with somebody who looks like just another guy. But somebody who'll bust him up good and proper for me. Somebody like you, Roy."

Roy shook his head. "That's not my line. I'm not a street fighter; I'm a pro. I mean, I'm *licensed.* I could get sent up for using my fists outside the ring."

"You won't get sent up, I guarantee it. You probably won't even get caught. But if you do, I'll put the fix in. I can buy any judge in Gretna."

"I don't know," Roy said, still shaking his head.

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"I'd consider this a personal favor," Jack Kono told him quietly, pointedly. "And there's five hundred in it for you."

Roy stared off at a section of embossed red wall covering. "I was hoping you'd called me over to offer me a fight on one of your cards," he said with soft honesty, keeping his eyes averted.

Kono frowned. "A fight? I didn't even know you were still active. I thought you retired after you lost two or three split decisions in a row. Somebody told me they saw you sweeping out old Rainey's poolroom. That's why I called you there."

"Yeah, well, I do that and I work the truck docks too, but on'y because I haven't been able to get no fights."

"So what do you want? You want to box again? Fine. Do this favor for me and I'll see that you get back in the ring."

Roy drummed his thick fingertips soundlessly on the brocaded place mat in front of him. Two or three good wins could put him into a main event, he thought. And a good main event might get him a TV fight on ESPN. And if he could beat a ranked contender on TV, with that kind of exposure, who knows, it might catapult him into a title shot. The middleweight division was currently wide open; anything could happen.

"Do you think you could get me a rematch with Sonny Boy Newton?" Roy asked. "I lost a split decision to him in eight last April, but I thought I beat him."

"Newton's boxing the hotel circuit now," Kono said. "You willing to go up to Atlantic City?"

"Sure," Roy replied eagerly.

"Can you make one-sixty?"

"Easy. A week's training."

"Okay, you take care of this little matter for me and I'll match you with Sonny Boy within ninety days. And I'll still give you the five bills. Deal?"

Roy bit his lip briefly, then nodded determinedly. "Deal."

That evening, Roy, Benny, and Sugar walked down to one of the Vieux Carre waterfront cafes for catfish. As soon as they were seated at one of the picnic-bench tables with their basket of breaded filets and pitcher of iced tea, Benny started in on both of them.

"How was school today, Sugar?"

"Just thrilling, Mama. A real adventure."

"Don't you smart-mouth me, young lady. What did you learn?"

"That the possibility of life exists on the planet Venus."

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Benny raised her eyebrows. "Well, that's interesting. I didn't know that." Her eyes shifted to Roy. "Tell me again what Kono said today."

"He said he'd get me a rematch with Sonny Boy Newton," Roy told her. "But first he wants me to have one warm-up bout across the river, a card he's putting on in Gretna."

"I didn't know they had fight cards in Gretna," Benny said.

"This is the first one. They're trying it out. Anyways, I get five hundred for a tune-up six-rounder, and if I win Kono'll make the rematch with Sonny Boy."

"You'll kick his ass this time, Roy," said Sugar.

Benny's eyebrows immediately pinched together and she fixed her daughter in a laser stare. "I cannot believe what I just heard," she said dramatically. "May I inquire where you are learning such talk?"

"School, I guess, Mama," Sugar replied innocently. "You ought to hear how some of those kids talk! They even use the 'F' word."

"That is disgusting. Roy, we have *got* to get out of this Quarter and into that tract of homes out by the airport. I refuse to allow Sugar to go to school down here next year."

"I like the Quarter, Mama," Sugar protested, realizing too late what she might have done.

"I don't care what you like. Be quiet. How much did you say you were getting for the tune-up in Gretna?" she asked Roy.

"Five hundred."

"We can get into a nice little two-bedroom, two-bath, twelve-hundred-square-foot patio home for three thousand down. Only thing is, you'd have to have a steady job. No bank is going to lend money to an unranked fighter who don't even have a manager. Do you think you could get Rainey to say you run the poolroom for him? If you could get him to say you'd worked there five years, and I could get Sam to say I'd worked at the cafe five years, why, I bet we could finance a patio home. What do you think?"

"I bet we could," Roy agreed. He tried never to disagree with Verbenia at mealtime. It made for serious indigestion. Breaking open a fillet with his fingers, he squeezed lemon juice all over it to absorb the catfish taste without neutralizing the catfish flavor, and laced it with salt and pepper.

"I could get a job delivering papers," Sugar suggested.

"You most certainly cannot," Benny squelched her. "You are to come directly home from school every day and stay inside, young

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lady. I do not want you on the streets of the Quarter. Roy, when is the Gretna fight?"

"Uh, I'm not sure yet. Next week some time."

"All right. You'll probably be training this weekend, so Sugar and I will take the airport bus out to that new tract and pick us out a place." She patted her daughter's hand. "Won't that be fun, Sugar?"

"Yeah, Mama. A real thrill."

On Saturday afternoon, Roy took the Jackson Street ferry across the Mississippi River to Gretna and hoofed it along used-car row on Route 18 until he spotted Sports Car Heaven squeezed between a recreational vehicle lot and a motorcycle repair shop. A couple of sailors were browsing among the sports cars, bird-dogged by a salesman with a belly that hung over double-knit slacks. There was a lone mechanic in the garage, working on a teal-blue Jaguar. Roy strolled in.

"Help you?" the mechanic asked. He was wearing a grease-stained jumpsuit with "Denny" over the chest pocket.

"You got a phone book I can look at?" Roy asked.

"Sure. Right in the office there." He pointed. "Hanging by the pay phone."

"Thanks."

Roy stepped through an open door into a small, windowed office where the pay phone was on the wall between a water cooler and a Dr Pepper machine. Pretending to look up a number, Roy peered over the top of the telephone directory and studied Denny Boyle. He was a nice-looking young man, twenty-five maybe, the clean-cut lines of his face interrupted only by a nose that was slightly crooked. The sleeves of his jumpsuit had been cut off and Roy could see that the mechanic had good biceps but no real muscle tone; he would be strong but slow. The arms were slightly long, so he'd probably have a couple of inches advantage over Roy in reach. Roy guessed his weight at one-seventy.

Overall, no problem, Roy decided. He could move in quick on the guy, get inside the reach, hook a few quick lefts to the body to bring the guy's hands down, then start busting his face open with straight rights and lefts. Ten, twelve shots ought to do it. The guy would feel like his head had been dragged behind a train.

Putting the directory down, Roy stepped back into the garage. "Thanks a lot," he said.

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"No problem," Denny Boyle replied. "Need directions or anything?"

"No, I just needed the number." Roy walked over to him. "What's a car like that cost?" he asked, bobbing his chin at the Jag.

"This model new runs about fifty-five and change," Boyle replied. He stopped working and wiped his hands on a chamois. "I wouldn't buy one, I was you."

"No? Why not?"

"Repair record stinks. Costs a fortune to maintain. You want your money's worth, get a Corvette. Can't go wrong with a 'Vette."

Roy nodded. "You know a lot about cars, huh?"

Denny Boyle smiled. "Cars and nothing else. I been tinkering with engines since I was ten. What do you drive?"

"Nothing right now. But I been thinking about buying one—"

As Roy spoke, a BMW sports car pulled up outside and a young woman got out and came into the garage. "Hi, honey," Denny Boyle said.

"Hey," she greeted him, then went over to his workbench to wait for him to finish talking.

Roy got a good look at her as she passed. She had the same soft Cajun features that Jack Kono had, without the reptilian eyes; hers, instead, were wide, lugubrious, almost frightened-looking. Her lips, too, were different: prominent, healthy, even suggestive. There was no question that it was Angela Kono, Jack Kono's "baby" sister—though from the way her body moved when she walked, there was nothing babyish or childlike about her; physically, Roy thought, she looked every bit the woman that Verbenia was. Roy had seen her around the quarter, at Tradition Hall and a couple of the smaller Dixieland clubs, but this was the first time he had been this close to her. Now he knew why her brother was concerned. With that body and those lips, she was a magnet for sex.

Roy decided to move on. "Listen, I got a friend needs some work on an old Gran' Prix he's got. You fix those?"

"I fix anything with an engine," Denny said. "And I'll work days, nights, Sundays, anytime." He grinned again. "I'm saving so me and my girl there can get married and have our own custom shop."

"That's great," Roy replied. "What time you close during the week?"

"I try to get out by six, but I can stay if there's work. Send your friend around anytime."

"I'll do that," Roy said.

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"Nice talking with you," Denny Boyle said as Roy walked away.

That night they had supper at a chili-dog joint because on Saturdays it was Sugar's turn to pick where they ate. Benny complained about it every week.

"I swear, this chili is nothing but grease with a few beans and a little ground beef to give it color. Can't you pick some place different for a change?"

"I like this place," Sugar replied steadfastly. Sugar never relinquished a perk once she got it.

"The chili's not bad if you dip your dog in it," Roy said. Which, of course, caused Benny to turn on him.

"Should you be eating that kind of stuff with a fight coming up? Shouldn't you be eating a salad or something healthy?"

"They don't serve healthy food here," Sugar pointed out. "Just good food."

"This won't hurt me," Roy said, shrugging.

"Just when is the fight anyway?"

"Monday night."

"Are you getting tickets for me and Sugar?"

Roy had been expecting her to ask and was prepared. He shook his head. "It's just club fights, Verbenia. They're holding 'em in a warehouse. It's no place for a woman and a little girl."

"I'm not a little girl, for God's sake," Sugar said crossly.

"Watch that mouth, young lady," Benny warned. "Roy, we have *got* to get her out of the Quarter and into a decent neighborhood. I wish to God I could find her daddy and get the eight years' worth of child support he's behind with." Benny leaned forward to impress urgency. "Listen, Sugar and me went out to that new tract by the airport today; it's called Lazy Acres, isn't that cute? The salesman out there was a really sweet guy named Lance, wore one of those spiffy gold pinkie rings. Anyway, he said if we wanted one of the units—that's what salesmen call the houses: units—anyway, Lance said we should get a down payment in as soon as possible 'cause the units are selling like hotcakes on a frosty morning. So, what I thought was, Sam at the cafe said he'd advance me five hundred on my wages and take twenty-five a week out until it was paid. Then I thought I'd ask my sister Dewanda to ask her husband Melvin if they could see their way clear to letting me have a loan of two thousand. Melvin's doing real good now; he's on the road selling

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manure to plant nurseries and he's pulling in twelve hundred a week commission, so I know they can afford it—"

"I'm not borrowing no money from your relatives," Roy said firmly.

"Well, I know *that,"* Benny retorted. "First off, they wouldn't loan *you* no money; it'll be me that's borrowing. Reason I think they'll do it is to help Sugar. They've always felt sorry for her—"

Sugar stuck a finger in her mouth. "You're going to make me barf, Mama—"

"Sugar, I'm going to slap you silly if you don't behave," Benny threatened.

"They feel sorry for *me?* Roy, you ought to see *their* kids. Two grossly fat girls and a boy who's a retarded nerd—"

"Melvin, Jr., is *not* retarded, Sugar!" her mother stormed. "He's just a little slow—"

"Not. He's *stopped."*

"That is *e-nough,* Sugar!"

The girl fell silent. Benny turned her attack back to Roy.

"All I want to know is if I can count on that five hundred from you on Monday."

"Yeah," Roy assured her. "Yeah, you can, Verbenia."

On Sunday morning, Roy went around to Jack Kono's private social club, a storefront on Royal Street with the windows painted black and a MEMBERS ONLY sign on the door. As he was walking up to knock, the door flew back and Angela Kono came striding out with an angry look on her face, muttering what sounded to Roy like obscenities. She glanced at him in passing, then paused, frowning, to stare at him. Roy, feeling himself turn red, knowing she probably recognized him from the previous day, turned away from her, caught the door before it closed, and hurried inside.

Kono was at the bar, watching a replay of the previous night's NBA game, looking very irritated. Roy took a stool beside him.

"Well?" Kono inquired at once.

"Well, I seen the guy," Roy told him. "At Sports Car Heaven, over to Gretna, just like you said."

"And?"

"And I don't see no problem," Roy shrugged. "He's bigger'n me and looks to be pretty strong, but I'll be able to handle him."

"I don't want him just 'handled,' " Kono said grimly. "I want the son of a bitch wrecked. My baby sister Angela was just in here to

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tell me her and that guy Boyle are talking marriage. She wants to bring him around to meet our mother!"

"You know, he don't seem like all that bad a guy," Roy said tentatively. Kono gave him a withering look.

"Don't try to second-guess me on this, you hear? This is a family matter. My sister is *not* going to marry some Gretna grease monkey who don't even have Cajun blood. Am I clear on that?"

"You're clear," Roy replied.

"Fine. When are you going to do it?"

"Tomorrow night, I guess," Roy decided. "Might as well get it over with. He quits work at six. I'll catch him on the car lot as he's leaving and pick a fight with him. All's I need is about sixty seconds max to do it."

"I want his jaw broken. And his nose," Kono specified. "Work on his kidneys, too, so's he'll pass blood for a while. That'll give him something to think about."

"Okay," Roy said, looking away. He suddenly felt like a man eating tainted food. An urge stirred in him to get up and walk away from the deal. But he had promised the five hundred to Verbenia.

"So you'll do it around six tomorrow?" Kono confirmed. Roy Britt nodded.

"Yeah. Six tomorrow."

"You'll be coming back on the seven o'clock ferry, then?"

"Yeah, probably."

Kono patted Roy's arm and smiled a scant smile. "Good deal."

When Roy left Kono's club, he had walked only a few doors down Royal when Angela Kono suddenly stepped from somewhere onto the sidewalk and confronted him.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded. "Do you work for my brother?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Roy said. He tried to move around her but she blocked his way. Her wide, dark Cajun eyes, looking like ripe plums, were seething with anger.

"You know what I'm talking about," she accused. "I saw you in Gretna yesterday, talking with Denny Boyle. What the hell's going on?"

"Nothing. Nothing's going on. You got the wrong guy, miss—"

"My brother is Jack Kono. You just came out of his club. And yesterday you were in Gretna talking to my boyfriend, Denny Boyle. Did my brother hire you to do something?"

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Roy felt like a stagecoach surrounded by Apaches. Angela Kono was right in his face. Two people walking by gave them curious looks. Down at the corner he could see a police cruiser turning into Royal.

"Look, miss, I'm a fighter, see? I went to talk to Jack Kono about getting a fight, that's all. And yesterday I only stopped in at that garage to look up somebody in the phone book. Then the mechanic and me got to talking after. If one of 'em's your brother and the other's your boyfriend, that's got nothing to do with me. I'm just doing my own thing, see? Now, why don't you let me go about my business?"

"You'd better not try anything with Denny Boyle," Angela Kono warned. "If my brother hired you to hurt him, you'd better think twice about doing it, because you won't get away with it. I'll go to the police. I'll tell them about both of you. You'll go to jail."

Roy shook his head wryly. "Miss, do you have any idea how many things the police have been told about your brother? Has he ever gone to jail for any of them?"

Angela Kono parted her sensuous lips to speak, to hurl a retort back at this thug with the lumpy scar tissue over each eye, but her words never reached sound. Because there was no retort, and they both knew it. In the Quarter, Jack Kono was above the law.

Turning her face away, Angela swallowed tightly. Roy looked awkwardly down at his shoes. He sucked in on his upper lip for a moment. Why, he wondered, didn't this girl understand that her brother was just trying to look out for her, trying to protect her? Jack Kono was her older brother; not only that, but with their father dead, he was the head of the Kono family. She should listen to him.

"Look," he said after a moment, "I'm sorry you got troubles, you know? But I got some of my own. I gotta go now."

He was glad she did not try to stop him when he stepped around her and hurried along the street.

Roy slept until nine-thirty on Monday morning. He might have slept longer but the bedroom window shade had a crack in it that allowed the morning sun to come in. It woke him and then he could not get back to sleep because he started thinking about what he had to do that night.

Getting up, he pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and went barefoot into the living room. Sugar, in her school clothes, was

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stretched out on the floor in front of the TV. Her schoolbooks were on the floor by the door.

"Better hurry, Sugar, or you'll be late for school," Roy cracked as he went over to the Pullman kitchen.

"Very funny," the girl said crossly. "I already *went* to school. Mama insisted on walking me there. I had to hide in the girls rest room for fifteen minutes and then walk all the way back."

"You must really be wore out," he said wryly, opening the half-size kitchenette refrigerator and surveying its contents. "You eat yet?"

"Uh-huh."

"What'd you eat?"

"Mama made me eat cornflakes before we left. When I got back, I had a fried-tomato-and-peanut-butter sandwich and a Cherry 7Up."

Roy shook his head. "You must have a cast-iron stomach, Sugar." He got out butter and peach preserves, spread some of each on two slices of sourdough bread, and poured a glass of milk. Going back into the living room, he sat on the couch to eat. "What are you watching?" he asked, frowning at the gory scene on the screen.

"Dr. Jekyll Meets Jack the Ripper," Sugar said.

"Which one is he?" Roy asked, bobbing his chin at the character on the screen.

"That's the Ripper."

"What's he doing?"

"Eviscerating a victim."

"Doing what?"

"Disemboweling her."

"What's that mean?"

"Cutting her open and taking out her insides, Roy," the girl said patiently.

"Isn't there anything else you can watch?" he asked, grimacing.

"Sure," Sugar replied cheerfully. "I can watch the news: war in Bosnia, starving kids in Somalia, riots in South Africa, drive-by killings in Los Angeles, gang rapes in New York—"

"Never mind," said Roy. "Watch what you're watching. At least it's not real."

When he finished eating, Roy went back to the little alcove kitchen and got out detergent to do a sink full of dirty dishes that had been left. Benny never did dishes. "I'm around dirty dishes all day; I can't cope with them at night," was her excuse. Now and then Sugar did them, but mostly it was left to him. Mother and daughter

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both knew he'd do them because he hated the sight of them.

While he was cleaning up, Sugar came over and lounged against the fridge. "You think you'll like living in Lazy Acres?"

Roy shrugged. "Don't know. Haven't never lived outside the city before."

"I won't like it," Sugar declared. "I'll hate it. There's no place to hang out. No bowling alley, no donut shop, no bus station—"

"Maybe you ought to try school again," he suggested.

"No, school's out for me," the girl replied analytically. "The teachers are boring, the classes are dull, the other girls are unbelievably silly, and the boys aren't interested in anything except looking up dresses. You should see how they purposely drop things on the floor so they can bend down to get them, then turn and look up the nearest dress while they're doing it. They're so juvenile."

"That's 'cause they're young," Roy said.

"Really? Golly, Roy, I never thought of that."

He looked steadily at her. "Your mother's right. We need to get you out of the Quarter."

"Well, if we move to Lazy Acres, I've made up my mind to run away. I'm going to Spain and become a flamenco dancer." She found a towel and began drying the dishes. "Who you fighting tonight?"

"Some dude, I don't know his name," Roy lied.

"I hope he's got a weak jab. I hate it when that right eye of yours gets opened up."

"It's no worse than one of those movies you're always watching."

"It is worse, Roy. It's you." She put an arm around his waist and gave him a quick hug. "I love you, Roy. I wish you were my daddy."

"Good thing I'm not. I let you get away with too much." He rinsed the sink and dried his hands on the dishtowel Sugar was using. "Promise me you won't run away without talking it over with me first."

Sugar shook her head. "Running away has to be spontaneous or it won't be any fun."

"What does 'spontaneous' mean?"

"Impulsive. You know, spur of the moment."

"Promise me you won't do that. It would hurt your mother too much."

"I can't promise that."

"Promise," he insisted.

"Roy-eee! No—"

"Promise!" His voice turned harsh and he gripped her arm.

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"All right, Roy, let go!" she decided to concede. Somewhere in the depths of her young mind she remembered her mother saying to another waitress, *"Roy's kind and gentle most of the time, but let me tell you, there's a temper underneath it all. Roy Britt is a guy you never want to push too far."*

"Promise?" he asked for verification.

"Yes, Roy, I promise. I do."

"Okay."

He let go of her arm.

By five-thirty that evening, Roy was on the recreational vehicle lot next to Sports Car Heaven, browsing around as if he were a customer. A salesman had approached him when he first got there, but Roy had put him off by saying he was just waiting for his wife to pick him up. From where he stood he could see Denny Boyle finishing up some kind of work on the engine of a black Datsun 280Z. A light was on in the sports-car-lot sales office but there was no salesman to be seen. Roy walked around among the recreational vehicles, looking in driver-side windows, kicking tires, always keeping the open repair-garage door clearly in sight.

It was already getting dark, the thin winter air cooling rapidly after the sun went down, a chilling wetness coming in from the waters of the muddy Mississippi and ankle-level fog crawling along the ground from the Gulf. The kind of spooky night that made people seek out jambalaya and gumbo and Dixieland music. Roy realized without knowing why that he really liked New Orleans, liked the French Quarter, more than anyplace he'd ever lived. He'd bummed around the Gulf Coast a lot before settling there—places like Mobile, Biloxi, Panama City, Port Arthur—but no place had ever suited him before. Maybe it had something to do with Verbenia and Sugar being there, he didn't know. All he was sure about was that it now felt like home. Maybe, he thought, if he and Sugar did some real fast talking, they could persuade Verbenia to consider buying an older house there in the Quarter that he could fix up a room at a time—

"So you were lying." A cutting female voice split the silence of his thoughts like a crack of lightning, startling the hell out of him. Roy whirled around to see Angela Kono standing six feet away, eyes riveted on him. "You're here to do something to Denny, aren't you? Did my brother hire you to kill him?"

Roy's mouth dropped open. *"Kill* him? I wouldn't kill nobody—"

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"What are you going to do then, cripple him? Break his fingers so badly that he won't be able to work on engines anymore?"

"Hey, I don't do stuff like that!" Roy declared. "What do you think I am, anyway?"

"I don't know," the fierce-looking young woman said. "Why don't you tell me. What are you?"

"I'm a fighter. I told you that yesterday—"

"Oh, yes, I remember. A fighter. What kind of a fighter?"

"A fighter," he repeated impatiently. "In the ring."

"Oh, I see. You mean you fight other fighters?"

"Yeah—"

"Except tonight you're going to fight an automobile mechanic, right?"

Roy felt his face become hot and knew it had turned red. It was almost as if he was a kid and this young woman, who was little more than a kid herself, had caught him doing something nasty and was shaming him for it.

"Listen, this whole thing is your fault, you know, not mine!" he accused. "If you'd listen to your older brother like you should, neither one of us would be in this fix!"

Angela Kono nodded knowingly. "Oh. Listen to my big brother, huh? Is that what I should be doing?"

"Yeah, it is!"

She got right in his face. "Do you know what incest is?" she asked in the coldest voice he had ever heard.

Frowning, Roy turned his face away, not answering. He hated admitting to anyone but Sugar when he didn't know what a word meant.

"You don't, do you?" Angela challenged. "You don't know what incest means." She stepped to the side where he had turned his face, and locked onto his eyes again. "Let me tell you what it means. Incest is where a parent has sex with one of their children. Or," she paused a beat for dreadful effect, "when a brother has sex with his sister."

Roy's face went blank, as if his mind had reset at zero and he was being given his very first piece of knowledge. Then, as he stared at the pretty young woman with the sad eyes, his memory kicked back in and began to help him think. Over the years he had heard dirty rumors now and again of a thing like that but he wasn't sure he had ever really believed them. To him, it just didn't seem possible that a girl's father, or her brother—

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Well, it just didn't seem possible, that's all. Why, he wasn't even Sugar's real father, wasn't actually related to her at all; yet she *seemed* like his child, and he knew she thought of him as her daddy. But the mere idea of him doing anything like that to Sugar—

It was disgusting. Sickening. Enough to make him puke.

"You find it hard to believe, don't you?" Angela asked, and now her voice lost its sharpness, its cruel edge, and took on a tone that matched her cheerless eyes. "Well, it's true," she assured him forlornly. "Since I was twelve years old. There were only the three of us left in that big old family house: my mother, who was quite old—I was a late-life baby; Jack, who was nineteen when I was born; and me. Everybody else had died or moved away, and that big old house had all those rooms in it—so many rooms. Sometimes I tried to hide from Jack, but he always found me. He said what we were doing was all right, as long as nobody else knew, as long as I didn't tell anybody. So it went on until I was thirteen, and fourteen, and fifteen, and—"

Her words broke off and she looked down at the asphalt of the recreational vehicle lot that showed between the wisps of fog, and shook her head in dismal helplessness. Roy felt awful, worse even than at the end of his toughest ten-round split-decision loss. If it hadn't been for Verbenia and Sugar, he'd have wished he was a million miles away.

"I'm sorry, miss," was all he could say. Then he found the words to add, "I didn't know nothing about that. I just thought your brother was, you know, looking out for you."

"I understand," she told him, looking up now, forcing a hint of a smile. "That's what everyone thinks: my mother, our neighbors, the nuns at school. You're not to blame for trying to help him."

"Well, I ain't helping him now," Roy said resolutely. He touched her arm, tentatively, briefly, then quickly pulled away. "You and your boyfriend don't have to worry none about me. I won't lay a hand on him."

"Thanks," she said. "We're getting out of here tonight. Denny's got a friend in Oklahoma City that's going to give him a working partnership in a shop there. It's our chance."

"A chance is all most people need," Roy told her quietly. "Good luck."

On impulse, Angela Kono leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. Then she hurried off the lot toward the garage next door, toward her future.

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* * *

Jack Kono was waiting on the Jackson Street ferry dock when the seven o'clock boat from Gretna moored and Roy came off with the other passengers. Kono had a slick young hood named Shimmy with him, a younger guy who modeled himself after Kono in dress and attitude, and who was known to carry a switchblade stiletto to protect his boss with. The two of them fell in with Roy as he started up the dock.

"Well?" Kono asked.

Roy didn't answer or look at him.

"How'd it go?" Kono demanded.

Roy still didn't answer or stop walking.

"Wait a goddamn minute, you!" Kono ordered, stepping in front of Roy to stop him. Seizing Roy's right wrist, Kono pulled up his hand and looked at it. It was clear that Roy's knuckles had not hit anything that night. Kono's face darkened. "What happened?"

"I changed my mind." Roy stepped around him and started walking. Kono quickly got in front of him and blocked his way again.

"Something happened," he accused. "What was it?"

"Nothing you don't already know about, Kono. Now leave me alone."

Again Roy stepped around him and continued on his way. The single, solitary thing he wanted in life at that moment was just to get home to Verbenia and Sugar.

But Jack Kono wasn't going to let him have that. He stepped in front of Roy again.

Roy's eyes turned mean. "I ain't going to move around you again, Kono," he said evenly.

"You won't have to, pug," said Kono, his reptilian eyes narrowing to slits. "Take him, Shimmy," he ordered.

Shimmy's right hand started out of the coat pocket where he carried his blade. But he wasn't even close to being quick enough. Roy pivoted to his left and drove an arcing, plowing right fist low and deep to Shimmy's groin. Shimmy felt his insides shrivel and turn hot as he dropped to his knees, lower body momentarily paralyzed. Then Roy turned back to Jack Kono.

"You low-life scum son of a bitch," he said in quiet, angry words.

Roy's experienced fists went to work in machinelike fashion, went to work on Jack Kono as they were supposed to have worked on Denny Boyle. A left jab set up a straight right that broke Kono's nose and sent a fire-hydrant rush of blood down the front of his silk

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suit. A right to the liver made Kono bend to that side and half turn, leaving the soft spot over one kidney unprotected. Roy drilled four hard lefts to that spot, all illegal blows had they been in the ring. *See how you like passing blood, you bastard,* he thought. As Kono stumbled backwards, Roy stayed right on him. The last punch he threw was a perfectly timed, perfectly placed right hook that generated a barely audible, brittle snapping sound that told Roy he had broken Jack Kono's left jawbone just under the ear.

Miraculously, Kono was still on his feet, staggering around the dock like a drunk man, holding his kidney area with one hand, trying to catch the blood from his broken nose with the other. Shimmy, groaning, was still on his knees.

Roy hurried past several people who had stopped to watch.

"Guys tried to rob me," he said in passing.

He walked away fast until he reached the mouth of an alley, then turned in and ran like hell.

Benny's expression was as barren as a winter desert.

"You mean you've been lying to me, Roy? Everything you told me about the fight in Gretna was a lie?"

"He didn't lie about the money, Mama," Sugar interjected a plea.

"Sugar," her mother said with rare harshness, "you stay out of this!" Then back to Roy, "It was all a lie?"

"Yeah," Roy admitted. "All except the five hundred, like Sugar said—"

"And you didn't even get that!" Benny fumed.

Roy unwrapped a towel that had four ice cubes in it from around his right hand. His index knuckle was swollen to about twice its normal size and was beginning to take on a greenish-purple color. Roy had known he hurt it, from the way his fist impacted on Jack Kono's jawbone; but he also knew the knuckle was not broken, because he could still bend and unbend his finger.

"Want a dry towel, Roy?" Sugar asked, her young face looking older with concern.

"No, Sugar, I gotta get going," he said, putting the icy wet towel in the sink.

"Going? Going where?" Benny demanded.

"I don't know where," Roy told her. "Anywhere. Just out of New Orleans."

"Oh, don't be silly, for God's sake," Benny said. "I'm not *that* mad at you."

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Roy and Sugar looked at her incredulously. In some ways she was more a child than Sugar was.

"Verbenia, I'm not leaving 'cause you're mad at me," Roy said patiently. "Right about now, Jack Kono's in some hospital getting his jaw wired. He's gonna have some gorillas after me before midnight. People die for what I done, honey. I gotta get out of town."

He went to the chifforobe in the bedroom and got out the few extra clothes he had and put them in his zippered gym bag. Sugar quickly got his shaving gear from the bathroom, put it in a plastic Baggie, and brought it to him. "I want to go with you, Roy," the girl whispered, her eyes tearing up.

"Don't start," he whispered back. "You got to stay with your mother."

Sugar pouted for a moment, but quickly gave it up and asked, "Don't you have any idea where you're going to?"

Roy glanced at an alarm clock on Benny's nightstand. It was almost nine. "There used to be a bus for Houston left about ten-thirty. I'll prob'ly try for that if it's still running." He put the hand that wasn't swelling under her chin. "Listen, wherever I end up, I'll send a postcard to old Rainey at the poolroom. I'll sign it 'Wingy,' like in 'Wingy Manone'—"

She knew at once. "The one-armed cornet player."

"Yeah. Then you'll know I got away all right. Okay?"

"Okay. But won't we never see each other again, Roy?" The tears left her eyes now and streaked her pale cheeks.

"Course we will," he assured her, knowing it was probably a lie. "I'll figure out something. You just take care of your mother, okay? Promise?"

Sugar promised, but her child's face reflected that it was the most miserable thing she had ever had to do. Standing in the bedroom door, watching him go out to speak to her mother, Sugar's chest trembled with sobs she would not permit herself to release.

"Verbenia, I'm sure sorry about all this," Roy said to Benny, who was sitting at their little breakfast table drumming her nails on its oilcloth covering.

"I know, Roy. I am too," Benny replied without looking up.

"Listen, I hate to ask." He lowered his voice, hoping Sugar would not hear. "But I on'y got a few bucks, and, well—"

"Sure, Roy." Benny rose and got her purse. "I borrowed the five hundred from Sam today. I'll give you a hundred of it, and that's all—"

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"That's plenty," Roy said. He noticed Sugar hurry back into the bedroom and kneel at her chifforobe drawer.

"Fall for a guy and end up giving him money to skip town," Benny muttered as she took the money from her purse. "Story of my life. At least this one's not leaving me pregnant."

She gave him the hundred. He started to kiss her goodbye, but she waved him away. "Just go, Roy."

"Okay." He turned away, hurt.

Before he got to the door, Sugar came running out to him and pressed some tightly folded currency into his hand. "Twelve dollars," she said. "I been lagging quarters with some kids in Louis Armstrong Park. I win nearly every day."

"Louis Armstrong Park!" her mother exclaimed, overhearing. "Why, that's all the way up to Rampart Street! What in the world were you doing up there, young lady?"

"Please take the money," Sugar begged Roy, ignoring her mother. "So I'll know I helped you get away. Please, Roy, it's important."

Smiling a slight smile, Roy took the money. He rubbed his painful knuckles briefly against her cheek. "Know something?" he said. "It's important to me too."

Then he was gone.

The ten thirty-five Greyhound to Houston via Baton Rouge and Beaumont was still running. Roy bought a one-way ticket and sat in a far corner of the terminal, back to the wall, drinking hot black coffee from a nearby vending machine as he watched the street entrance for anyone entering who looked like they might work for Jack Kono. When the departure was announced over the loudspeaker an hour later, Roy was the first passenger to board. He took a window seat about halfway back where he could see through the open boarding-platform doors into the passenger terminal. Settling back, his bag on the overhead rack, he shifted his eyes from the terminal to the other passengers, scrutinizing each one as they boarded. None of them looked threatening in any way. When they were all on board, the bus was only about half full. Least I'll be able to get comfortable, Roy thought. Maybe get some shuteye. He kept his eyes on what he could see of the passenger terminal.

Two minutes before the bus was due to depart, Benny and Sugar came hurrying onto the boarding platform lugging a couple of beat-up suitcases and looking like a pair of magpies with both their mouths going at once. Benny had Sugar get on to make sure Roy

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was aboard, then they gave their tickets to the driver and maneuvered their suitcases down the aisle to where Roy stood to meet them.

"Don't even ask," Benny said peremptorily with a wave of her hand. "I couldn't explain this in a million years. Let's just say I'm crazy."

"This isn't very smart, Verbenia," he said, taking the suitcase she handed him.

As Benny slid into a seat, Sugar punched Roy on the muscle. 'Don't you blow this, Roy," she whispered a warning. "I went through hell getting her here."

"Still not very smart."

"Just put the suitcases up."

Sugar sat across the aisle, leaving the seat next to her mother for Roy. She noticed as Roy sat down that Benny took his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. Sugar smiled.

"I gave Sam back three hundred of the five and promised we'd send him the rest," Benny said.

"Okay, honey," said Roy, patting her head.

The driver got behind the wheel. The big passenger door closed with a pneumatic hiss. Several seconds later there was the choking of a diesel engine firing up and a sigh of air brakes being released. The bus began to move.

As the Greyhound pulled back from the boarding platform, Roy looked past Benny out the window and saw Shimmy, the punk he had encountered earlier with Jack Kono. Shimmy was with another hood, bigger and meaner looking. Both stood on the platform and stared hard at the Houston-bound bus as it swung away and left.

Roy wet lips that suddenly went dry. They must have followed Verbenia and Sugar, he thought.

Well, that's all she wrote, he told himself. There'd be somebody waiting every place the bus stopped, watching for him to get off. They had him, and that was that.

He thought about it in the dim light of the moving bus for a while, and finally decided he'd wait until Verbenia and Sugar went to sleep, then get off at the next stop. That way, at least the two of them wouldn't be involved. He didn't want them with him when Kono's hoods caught up with him. He didn't want them to see what would happen.

If they got away, he thought, this was one split decision he would win. ●

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The Deadliest Games... Are the Most Fun

The Deadliest Games

Tales of Psychological Suspense from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*
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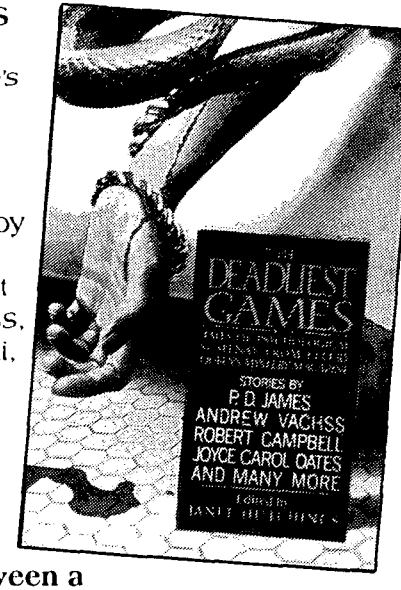

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA OWENS

As Congress debates a ban on smoking in all public places, California's Barbara Owens offers a reflection on the trials of the "reformed" smoker. If you've ever tried to kick the habit, perhaps you'll recognize certain murderous urges . . .

BAD HABITS

by BARBARA OWENS

My name is Mary Lou and I'm a good person. I would, for instance, like to see all wars end and world peace come about. I'm a patsy for anyone asking for a handout, and if I ever find an old lady attempting to cross a busy street, I'll cross her. Just the mention of Bambi reduces me to tears. It's true that I've killed my share of mice and spiders, but I like to think I'll be forgiven for that. The point I'm trying to make is that I'm a kind and gentle person. I don't usually judge—live and let live, I always say. You need to know that before you hear my story.

I remember so clearly that momentous day when I decided to give up cigarettes. It was spring, the season of new beginnings. Birdies sang, shy buds opened, and, Mary Lou, I said to myself, the time has come. You're not getting any younger and you've been sucking on those little suckers for over twenty years. If all those saintly nonsmokers are correct, your lungs resemble a lump of coal by now. What's more, you're being blamed for contributing to the demise of everyone who ever came close enough to catch a whiff of your smoky breath. Face it, Mary Lou, I said, this is the only bad habit you possess and it's a deadly one. You have a responsibility here. Stop the senseless slaughter and get clean.

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My resolve blazed like a new sun in the sky. I took two weeks' vacation from the insurance company where I work and holed up in my little apartment to become pure again. To keep my suddenly empty hands busy, I bought many skeins of yarn in hopeful colors and plotted a complicated afghan. My refrigerator bulged with carrot sticks, celery sticks, and healthy green grapes. Little bowls of sunflower seeds were placed strategically throughout my three rooms, at least one always within easy reach. I felt ready, I felt determined, I felt holy. I was about to do something for mankind.

My friend Jan, from the office, called me on the second day.

"How's it going?" she greeted me, and I listened raptly as I heard her inhale and release a fragrant blue wreath of smoke into the phone. My nostrils flared, trying to catch it. "You doing okay?"

I had slept a total of two hours the night before. The palms of my hands and the soles of my feet itched. My stomach cramped and my eyes burned. I jumped and screamed at the slightest sound.

"I'm doing fine," I answered gaily. "This is going to be easier than I thought."

On the fourth day, I hurled the celery, the carrots, the grapes, and the sunflower seeds into the garbage and dragged my ravaged body to the corner drugstore to buy large bags of candy bars. As I passed the cigarette display, bright little packages smiling at me, I began to cry. The checkout girl pretended not to notice, but I could tell by the expression on her face that she saw my shaking hands and the furious tic in my right eye.

Jan called again on Saturday. "You up to going out tonight?" she queried cheerfully. I pictured her in her cluttered little kitchen, coffee and cigarettes at hand, a friendly blue haze drifting in the sunlight. I found the vicious snarl trying to escape.

"I don't think so," was my pleasant response. "I'm all involved in this afghan I'm knitting. Maybe next weekend."

"Well, okay." Her disappointment was obvious. "But it's men's league at the bowling alley and we could check out the guys. You gotta remember, Mary Lou, our clocks are ticking."

I had given up trying to convince her that my clock had run down. Jan still had teenage romance in her heart and big dreams under the rinse that covered the gray in her hair. I had learned to be more realistic. Jan was short and scrawny, and I'm built more like my brother than my brother is, so I didn't harbor false hopes for either of us. But she was my friend, so I said kindly, "Next week. I promise. Guys."

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The afghan proceeded at a furious pace, uneven and stained with dabs of melted chocolate, while my teeth grew fur and I began to talk to everything in my apartment. The bathroom mirror sent back an image with sunken, sleepless eyes, and that made me so angry that I stormed through the apartment, kicking the furniture just to show it who was boss.

Then I read a magazine article about addictive personalities. It said that people afflicted with them had tremendous difficulty stopping something once they had started. That knowledge brought on more tears and another furtive trip outside for a new stock of candy bars. I thought I would die if I didn't have a cigarette.

But then a day dawned that was a miracle. I had slept five hours and I woke smelling the spring air flowing through my open window. I made waffles for breakfast and went out afterwards for a walk. I walked for blocks, not coughing once, and the air felt clean and clear in my lungs. I watched two men smoking in a window booth of a coffee shop, and although my treacherous nose twitched in longing at sight of the cloud over their heads, my heart pitied them. They didn't know how it felt to be good and pure, like me.

By Saturday I had stopped shaking and my step was firm. I answered Jan's call with a song on my lips, and I was waiting, clear-eyed, on the curb out front when she pulled up in her old clunker. Jan was puffing on a cigarette. The car reeked of smoke.

"So did you do it?" she asked as we barged back into traffic. "Did you honest-to-God quit?"

I assured her serenely that I did, and she said she was proud of me. On our way to the bowling alley she filled me in on what was happening at the office and smoked one cigarette after another. Slowly, I began to fill with dread. I wanted one too, I needed one, I had an urge to snatch the lit one from her mouth. Jan, my good friend, did not understand my fragile condition. Even gentle waves of my hand, trying to dissipate blue air wafting into my face, did not seem to register with her. It wasn't until we pulled into the parking lot at the bowling alley that she said, "Oh, Mary Lou, I didn't even think. Does my smoking bother you?"

Remember that I told you I was kind and generous. Live and let live. "Of course not," I said. "But you should seriously think about giving it up. I swear, Jan, you'll be a new person."

She had to pump the brakes hard to bring the old car to a stop. Something was always wrong with that car. This week it seemed to be the brakes.

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"I know I should quit," she admitted, hurrying me inside. "But I get scared just thinking about it. I've been at it too long, I guess."

I was eager to give her moral support, to tell her how much better she'd feel once the struggle was over, but she wasn't ready to listen. There were men all over the bowling alley and Jan's eyes glazed.

We made the usual pretense at bowling, but that wasn't our purpose for being there, and before long we were in the bar with an Ed and a Donnie, and everyone was lighting up but me.

"No, thanks," I said sweetly when Donnie shoved a pack at me. "I don't smoke." No one needed to know that I was salivating and had a ringing in my ears.

"Mary Lou just quit," Jan trilled. "Isn't she brave? I wish I could, but I'm just a girl with no will power at all."

Both men slid disinterested glances at me. I felt embarrassed, as usual. Jan had practically thrown us at these men and they were plainly just killing time. Not that either of them was a prize. Donnie's beer gut hung over his belt like a soft balloon and Ed had two teeth missing in his smile. I suddenly wondered what I was doing there in that crowded bar hung heavy with smoke. I had never noticed before how thick the haze was, how everyone was filling everyone else's lungs with black gunk. My nose and eyes burned and I felt a headache coming on. Mary Lou, I said to myself right there in the bowling alley bar, get hold of yourself. You're cured, remember? You're better than these people with their disgusting habit. You've done something about it. You're strong.

After a few minutes of Jan's gushing and giggling, Ed and Donnie left us sitting alone in the bar and I said I was ready to go home. Jan was disappointed but hopeful.

"Maybe they'll be back next week," she said, as she lurched to an uncertain stop before my building. "I kind of thought Ed liked me."

"Goodnight, Jan," I said.

Well, Mary Lou, I said, back inside my apartment, here you are again, stinking of smoke. It's in your clothes, your hair, and you didn't even enjoy getting it there. How are you going to stay away from it when it's everywhere? I listened, but I heard no answer.

As the days passed, I began to notice them everywhere. Smokers all around—on the streets, in the office, in restaurants—billowing smoke at me all day long. It wasn't fair. After all I had gone through to help clear their air, was this the thanks I got? Shouldn't they be doing their part? Why should they be enjoying themselves when I couldn't anymore? I was too polite to say anything, however. That's

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the kind of person I am. Live and let live, Mary Lou, I kept reminding myself.

Jan's attitude, in particular, bothered me. She was supposed to be my friend, but she puffed in my face day in and day out without a thought for my welfare. In the office, in the car, she didn't care. She even came to my apartment one night for dinner and stunk up the place until I had to open a window to let in air. That night I finally did speak up.

"Honestly, Jan," I said, "if you can't stop that filthy habit, you could at least stop blowing smoke at me. Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to live in clouds of it anymore?"

She looked surprised for a minute, then laughed and lit another one. "Boy, you almost fooled me. I thought you were going goody-goody on me."

"You're killing me with your smoke," I said, with as much force as I could muster. "That's not what friends are for."

Jan was never quick to take a hint. "Oh, pooh," she said. "There's tons more stuff in the air outside and in the food you eat that'll kill you before my little cigarette does." When she laughed, a small smoky wind whooshed into my face.

Well, I guess I know where she stands, I told myself after she had gone. We've learned something tonight, haven't we? Not everyone is as conscientious as I am. That's something to think about.

I thought about it when I rode nineteen floors in a crowded elevator next to a man puffing away under the No Smoking sign, and I thought about it in the Laundromat when a woman stood next to me at the folding table and blew smoke into my fresh clean things. I thought about it every day we ate lunch at the little diner next-door to the office, and I thought about it at our weekly meeting in the conference room, where it was like looking at people through fog. But I thought about it most with Jan, because we were together so much of the time. After that night at my apartment, the subject never came up again, and she kept up her nonstop smoking. I arrived home every night with a headache, my clothes smelling charred. And, finally, I came up with an answer. It was only fair.

"Let's go to the High Top for pizza tonight," I said to her one Friday afternoon. "I'm in the mood."

"Gosh, I don't know, Mary Lou," Jan said with a little frown. "That driveway's so steep and my brakes are getting worse." But her face cleared before I could say anything more. "Oh, what the

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heck. I'm in the mood, too. Besides, they've got cute waiters there. Let's go."

The High Top sat on a steep hill over the river, and its driveway was narrow and treacherous. It had seen more than a few accidents in its day. I managed to be late getting ready, so that by the time we finished eating most of the crowd was gone. There were only a few cars left in the lot when we made our way back outside. The whole parking area was built on the hill's slant, so as Jan started to back out, tipping the car's rear downhill, I said, "Wait. Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Jan said.

"I thought I heard a clunk. Like something fell off the back end."

Her eyes got round. "No kidding? What's back there, do you know?"

I said I didn't, and she said she didn't either, so she took her little flashlight out of the glove compartment and got out to look. I could see her through the rear window, bending over.

"No, it was further underneath," I called softly. "Get down on your hands and knees." We were alone in the parking lot.

"Well, okay," Jan said reluctantly. "But you watch the brakes."

"I will," I assured her, and as soon as I saw her disappear from the window and heard her shoes scrape against asphalt, I simply gave the emergency brake a little tap and the car rolled backward down the hill. It was a nice heavy car, too. I was brave—I waited until it started around a corner before I jumped.

The police officers were kind. I explained how I had tried to stop the car to save my friend, but that her brakes were faulty and wouldn't hold. They told me they could see by what remained of the car that it shouldn't have been on the road in the first place, and that I mustn't blame myself, I had done all I could. They sent me to the hospital for my scrapes and bruises to be tended, and that was that.

So easy. No more Saturday nights at the bowling alley. It was her own fault, I consoled myself. I tried to get her to stop smoking. Now there was one less of them in the world. It was a shame, but it had to be done.

After the first days of freedom passed, though, I had to settle down and face reality. There were many more of them out there. Blowing smoke into other people's faces, tempting those like me to take up a bad habit again. It wasn't fair. What I had done wasn't enough. The danger was still out there. It was a hard decision, but I finally

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told myself, Okay, Mary Lou, this is serious. You have an even bigger responsibility than you thought. No more live and let live for you.

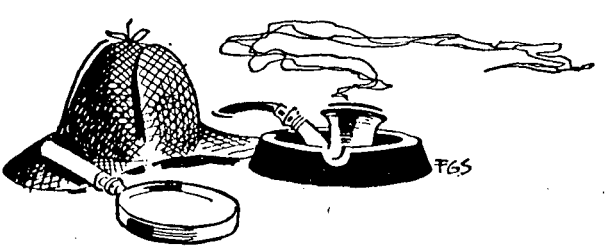
Fortunately, this is a big city where I live, so easy to get lost in crowds. There was the teenager a few weeks ago, puffing away on the train platform when he lost his balance and fell right into the path of an oncoming train. And the man in the park where I like to walk, so drunk he couldn't even get his cigarette lit. His lungs were so far gone he didn't last long with my spare pantyhose wrapped around his neck. And the others, too numerous to mention. I'm putting a dent in the problem, but I still have a long way to go. That's all right, though. I have plenty of time, and not much else to do now that Jan is gone. I think of it as a mission.

It's possible, I suppose, that some of you are horrified by what I'm doing, but I meant it when I said I was a kind and gentle person. I'll prove it to you. Last week I found a half-starved kitten as I was coming home late after another action. I brought him to my apartment and nursed him back to health. He's a darling. I think you'd have to agree that only a soft-hearted person would do that.

It's something like those mice and spiders I told you about earlier—I believe I'll be forgiven. Some things are simply too unpleasant to have around. My conscience is clear. It's a dirty job, Mary Lou, I told myself at the beginning, but you know what they say—someone has to do it.

And it's for you as well as for me. It should be comforting for you to know that I'm out here doing my job. Unless, of course, you're one of them. If that's the case, you'd better think twice before lighting up again. You never know who might be standing nearby. In the crowd.

By the way, that magazine article about addictive personalities was right, I'm afraid. This feels so good that it's going to be hard to stop.



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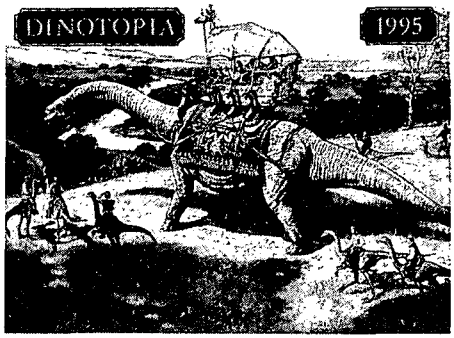

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Readers of Peter Robinson's Inspector Banks stories and novels who are also familiar with the Yorkshire Dales may wonder how closely Banks's surroundings are based on real dales locations. The author had this to say in a recent interview for the fanzine Murder Ink: *"In order to get a bit of imaginative freedom, I invented a dale, Swainsdale, and I gave it a large town, Eastvale. It's based on real Yorkshire towns, but it's about twice as big, because I wanted to deal with more urban aspects of crime . . ." It's rural crime that engages Banks in this new adventure, which takes him to the remotest reaches of the dale . . .*

SUMMER RAIN

by PETER ROBINSON

1.

"And exactly how many times have you died, Mr. Singer?"

"Fourteen. That's fourteen I've managed to uncover. They say that each human being has lived about twenty incarnations. But it's the last one I'm telling you about. See, I died by violence. I was murdered."

Detective Constable Susan Gay made a note on the yellow pad in front of her. When she looked down, she noticed that she had doodled an intricate pattern of curves and loops, a bit like Spaghetti Junction, during the few minutes she had been talking to Jerry Singer.

She tried to keep the scepticism out of her voice. "Ah-hah. And when was this, sir?"

"Nineteen sixty-six. July. That makes it exactly twenty-eight years ago this week."

"I see."

Jerry Singer had given his age as twenty-seven, which meant that he had been murdered a year before he was born.

"How do you know it was nineteen sixty-six?" Susan asked.

Singer leaned forward. He was a remarkably intense young man, Susan noticed, thin to the point of emaciation, with glittering green

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eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. He looked as if the slightest breeze would blow him away. His fine red hair had a gossamer quality that reminded Susan of spiders' webs. He wore jeans, a red T-shirt, and a grey anorak, its shoulders darkened by the rain. Though he said he came from San Diego, California, Susan could detect no trace of suntan.

"It's like this," he began. "There's no fixed period between incarnations, but my channeler told me—"

"Channeler?" Susan interrupted.

"She's a kind of spokesperson for the spirit world."

"A medium?"

"Not quite." Singer managed a brief smile. "But close enough. More a mediator, really."

"Oh, I see," said Susan, who didn't. "Go on."

"Well, she told me there would be a period of about a year between my previous incarnation and my present one."

"How did she know?"

"She just *knows*. It varies from one soul to another. Some need a lot of time to digest what they've learned and make plans for the next incarnation. Some souls just can't wait to return to another body." He shrugged. "After some lifetimes, you might simply get tired and need a long rest."

After some mornings, too, Susan thought. "Okay," she said, "let's move on. Is this your first visit to Yorkshire?"

"It's my first trip to England, period. I've just qualified in dentistry, and I thought I'd give myself a treat before I settled down to the daily grind."

Susan winced. Was that a pun? Singer wasn't smiling. A New Age dentist, now there was an interesting combination, she thought. Can I read your tarot cards for you while I drill? Perhaps you might like to take a little astral journey to Neptune while I'm doing your root canal? She forced herself to concentrate on what Singer was saying.

"So, you see," he went on, "as I've never been here before, it *must* be real, mustn't it?"

Susan realized she had missed something. "What?"

"Well, it was all so familiar, the landscape, everything. And it's not only the déjà vu I had. There was the dream, too. We haven't even approached this in hypnotic regression yet, so—"

Susan held up her hand. "Hang on a minute. You're losing me. What was so familiar?"

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"Oh, I thought I'd made that clear."

"Not to me."

"The place. Where I was murdered. It was near here. In Swainsdale."

2.

Banks was sitting in his office with his feet on the desk and a buff folder open on his lap when Susan Gay popped her head around the door. The top button of his white shirt was undone and his tie hung askew.

That morning, he was supposed to be working on the monthly crime figures, but instead, through the half-open window, he listened to the summer rain as it harmonized with Michael Nyman's soundtrack from *The Piano,* playing quietly on his portable cassette player. His eyes were closed and he was daydreaming of waves washing in and out on a beach of pure white sand. The ocean and sky were the brightest blue he could imagine, and tall palm trees dotted the landscape. The pastel village that straddled the steep hillside looked like a cubist collage.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Susan said, "but it looks like we've got a right one here."

Banks opened his eyes and rubbed them. He felt as if he were coming back from a very long way. "It's all right," he said. "I was getting a bit bored with the crime statistics, anyway." He tossed the folder onto his desk and linked his hands behind his head. "Well, what is it?"

Susan entered the office. "It's sort of hard to explain, sir."

"Try."

Susan told him about Jerry Singer. As he listened, Banks's blue eyes sparkled with amusement and interest. When Susan had finished, he thought for a moment, then sat up and turned off the music. "Why not?" he said. "It's been a slow week. Let's live dangerously. Bring him in." He fastened his top button and straightened his tie.

A few moments later, Susan returned with Jerry Singer in tow. Singer looked nervously around the office and took the seat opposite Banks. The two exchanged introductions, then Banks leaned back and lit a cigarette. He loved the mingled smells of smoke and summer rain.

"Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning," he said.

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"Well," said Singer, turning his nose up at the smoke, "I've been involved in regressing to past lives for a few years now, partly through hypnosis. It's been a fascinating journey, and I've discovered a great deal about myself." He sat forward and rested his hands on the desk. His fingers were short and tapered. "For example, I was a merchant's wife in Venice in the fifteenth century. I had seven children and died giving birth to the eighth. I was only twenty-nine. In my next incarnation, I was an actor in a troupe of Elizabethan players, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. I remember playing Bardolph in *Henry V* in 1599. Then I was—"

"I get the picture," said Banks. "I don't mean to be rude, Mr. Singer, but maybe we can skip to the twentieth century?"

Singer paused and frowned at Banks. "Sorry. Well, as I was telling Detective Constable Gay here, it's the least clear one so far. I was a hippie. At least, I think I was. I had long hair, wore a caftan, bell-bottom jeans. And I had this incredible sense of déjà vu when I was driving through the Dale yesterday afternoon."

"Where, exactly?"

"It was just before Fortford. I was coming from Helmthorpe, where I'm staying. There's a small hill by the river with a few trees on it, all bent by the wind. Maybe you know it?"

Banks nodded. He knew the place. The hill was, in fact, a drumlin, a kind of whale-backed mound of detritus left by the retreating ice age. Six trees grew on it, and they had all bent slightly to the south-east after years of strong northwesterly winds. The drumlin was about two miles west of Fortford.

"Is that all?" Banks asked.

"All?"

"Yes." Banks leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. "You know there are plenty of explanations for déjà vu, don't you, Mr. Singer? Perhaps you've seen a place very similar before and only remembered it when you passed the drumlin?"

Singer shook his head. "I understand your doubts," he said, "and I can't offer concrete *proof,* but the *feeling* is unmistakable. I have been there before, in a previous life. I'm certain of it. And that's not all. There's the dream."

"Dream?"

"Yes. I've had it several times. The same one. It's raining, like today, and I'm passing through a landscape very similar to what I've seen in Swainsdale. I arrive at a very old stone house. There are people and their voices are raised, maybe in anger or laughter,

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I can't tell. But I start to feel tense and claustrophobic. There's a baby crying somewhere and it won't stop. I climb up some creaky stairs. When I get to the top, I find a door and open it. Then I feel that panicky sensation of endlessly falling, and I usually wake up frightened."

Banks thought for a moment. "That's all very interesting," he said, "but have you considered that you might have come to the wrong place? We're not usually in the business of interpreting dreams and visions."

Singer stood his ground. "This is real," he said. "A crime has been committed. Against me." He poked himself in the chest with his thumb. "The crime of murder. The least you can do is do me the courtesy of checking your records." His odd blend of naivete and intensity charged the air.

Banks stared at him, then looked at Susan, whose face showed sceptical interest. Never having been one to shy away from what killed the cat, Banks let his curiosity get the better of him yet again. "All right," he said, standing up. "We'll look into it. Where did you say you were staying?"

3.

Banks turned right by the whitewashed sixteenth-century Rose and Crown in Fortford and stopped just after he had crossed the small stone bridge over the River Swain.

The rain was still falling, obscuring the higher green dalesides and their latticework of drystone walls. Lyndgarth, a cluster of limestone cottages and a church huddled around a small village green, looked like an Impressionist painting. The rain-darkened ruins of Devraulx Abbey, just up the hill to his left, poked through the trees like a setting for Camelot.

Banks rolled his window down and listened to the rain slapping against leaves and dancing on the river's surface. To the west, he could see the drumlin that Jerry Singer had felt so strongly about.

Today, it looked ghostly in the rain, and it was easy to imagine the place as some ancient barrow where the spirits of Bronze Age men lingered. But it wasn't a barrow; it was a drumlin created by glacial deposits. And Jerry Singer hadn't been a Bronze Age man in his previous lifetime; he had been a sixties hippie, or so he believed.

Leaving the window down, Banks drove through Lyndgarth and parked at the end of Gristhorpe's rutted driveway, in front of the squat limestone farmhouse. Inside, he found Gristhorpe staring

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gloomily out the back window at a pile of stones and a half-completed drystone wall. The superintendent, he knew, had taken a week's holiday and hoped to work on the wall, which went nowhere and closed in nothing. But he hadn't bargained for the rain, which had been falling nonstop for the past two days.

He poured Banks a cup of tea so strong you could stand a spoon up in it, offered some scones, and they sat in Gristhorpe's study. A paperback copy of Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* lay on a small table beside a worn and scuffed brown leather armchair.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" Banks asked.

Gristhorpe considered the question a moment. "No. Why?"

Banks told him about Jerry Singer, then said, "I wanted your opinion. Besides, you were here then, weren't you?"

Gristhorpe's bushy eyebrows knit in a frown. "Nineteen sixty-six?"

"Yes."

"I was here, but that's almost thirty years ago, Alan. My memory's not what it used to be. Besides, what makes you think there's anything in this other than some New Age fantasy?"

"I don't know that there is," Banks answered, at a loss how to explain his interest, even to the broad-minded Gristhorpe. Boredom, partly, and the oddness of Singer's claim, the certainty the man seemed to feel about it. But how could he tell his superintendent that he had so little to do he was opening investigations into the supernatural? "There was a sort of innocence about him," he said. "And he seemed so sincere about it, so intense."

" 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.' W. B. Yeats," Gristhorpe replied.

"Perhaps. Anyway, I've arranged to talk to Jenny Fuller about it later today." Jenny was a psychologist who had worked with the Eastvale police before.

"Good idea," said Gristhorpe. "All right, then, just for argument's sake, let's examine his claim objectively. He's convinced he was a hippie murdered in Swainsdale in summer, nineteen sixty-six, right?"

Banks nodded.

"And he thinks this because he believes in reincarnation, he had a déjà vu, and he's had a recurring dream?"

"True."

"Now," Gristhorpe went on, "leaving aside the question of whether you or I believe in reincarnation, or, indeed, whether there is such

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a thing—a philosophical speculation we could hardly settle over tea and scones, anyway—he doesn't give us a hell of a lot to go on, does he?"

"That's the problem. I thought you might remember something."

Gristhorpe sighed and shifted in his chair. The scuffed leather creaked. "In nineteen sixty-six, I was a thirty-two-year-old detective sergeant in a backwoods division. In fact we were nothing but a subdivision then, and I was the senior detective. Most of the time I investigated burglaries, the occasional outbreak of sheep stealing, market-stall owners fencing stolen goods." He sipped some tea. "We had one or two murders—really interesting ones I'll tell you about someday—but not a lot. What I'm saying, Alan, is that no matter how poor my memory is, I'd remember a murdered hippie."

"And nothing fits the bill?"

"Nothing. I'm not saying we didn't have a few hippies around, but none of them got murdered. I think your Mr. Singer must be mistaken."

Banks put his mug down on the table and stood up to leave. "Better get back to the crime statistics, then," he said.

Gristhorpe smiled. "So *that's* why you're so interested in this cock-and-bull story? Can't say I blame you. Sorry I can't help. Wait a minute, though," he added as they walked to the door. "There was old Bert Atherton's lad. I suppose that was around the time you're talking about, give or take a year or two."

Banks paused at the door. "Atherton?"

"Aye. Owns a farm between Lyndgarth and Helmthorpe. Or did. He's dead now. I only mention it because Atherton's son, Joseph, was something of a hippie."

"What happened?"

"Fell down the stairs and broke his neck. Family never got over it. As I said, old man Atherton died a couple of years back, but his missis is still around."

"You'd no reason to suspect anything?"

Gristhorpe shook his head. "None at all. The Athertons were a decent, hard-working family. Apparently the lad was visiting them on his way to Scotland to join some commune or other. He fell down the stairs. They called nine-nine-nine. It's a pretty isolated spot, and it was too late when the ambulance arrived. They were really devastated. He was their only child."

"What made him fall?"

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"He wasn't pushed, if that's what you're thinking. There was no stair carpet and the steps were a bit slippery. According to his dad, Joseph was walking around without his slippers on and he slipped in his stockinged feet."

"And you've no reason to doubt him?"

"No. I did have one small suspicion at the time, though."

"What?"

"According to the postmortem, Joseph Atherton was a heroin addict, though he didn't have any traces of the drug in his system at the time of his death. I thought he might have been smoking marijuana or something up in his room. That might have made him a bit unsteady on his feet."

"Did you search the place?"

Gristhorpe snorted. "Nay, Alan. There was no sense bringing more grief on his parents. What would we do if we found something, charge *them* with possession?"

"I see your point." Banks opened the door and put up his collar against the rain. "I might dig up the file anyway," he called, running over to the car. "Enjoy the rest of your week off."

Gristhorpe's curse was lost in the sound of the engine starting up and the finale of Mussorgsky's "Great Gate of Kiev" on Classic FM blasting out from the radio, which Banks had forgotten to switch off.

4.

In addition to the cells and the charge room, the lower floor of Eastvale Divisional Headquarters housed old files and records. The dank room was lit by a single bare light bulb and packed with dusty files. So far, Banks had checked nineteen sixty-five and sixty-six but found nothing on the Atherton business.

Give or take a couple of years, Gristhorpe had said. Without much hope, Banks reached for nineteen sixty-four. That was a bit too early for hippies, he thought, especially in the far reaches of rural North Yorkshire.

In nineteen sixty-four, he remembered, the Beatles were still recording ballads like "I'll Follow the Sun" and old rockers like "Long Tall Sally." John hadn't met Yoko, and there wasn't a sitar within earshot. The Rolling Stones were doing "Not Fade Away" and "It's All Over Now," the Kinks had a huge hit with "You Really Got Me," and the charts were full of Dusty Springfield, Peter and Gordon, the Dave Clark Five, and Herman's Hermits.

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So nineteen sixty-four was a write-off as far as dead hippies were concerned. Banks looked anyway. Maybe Joseph Atherton had been way ahead of his time. Or perhaps Jerry Singer's channeler had been wrong about the time between incarnations, and the soul had needed longer than a year. Why was this whole charade taking on such an aura of unreality?

Banks's stomach rumbled. Apart from that scone at Gristhorpe's, he hadn't eaten since breakfast, he realized. He put the file aside. Though there hardly seemed any point looking further ahead than nineteen sixty-six, he did so out of curiosity. Just as he was feeling success slip away, he came across it: Joseph Atherton. Coroner's verdict: accidental death. There was only one problem: it had happened in 1969.

According to the Athertons' statement, their son wrote to say he was coming to see them on his way to Scotland. He said he was on his way to join some sort of commune and arrived at Eastvale station on the London train at three forty-five in the afternoon, July 11, 1969. By ten o'clock that night, he was dead. He didn't have transport of his own, so his father had met him at the station in the Land Rover and driven him back to the farm.

Banks picked up a sheet of lined writing paper, yellowed around the edges. A separate sheet described it as an anonymous note received at the Eastvale police station about a week after the coroner's verdict. All it said, in block capitals, was, "ASK ATHERTON ABOUT THE RED VOLKSWAGEN."

Next came a brief interview report, in which a PC Wythers said he had questioned the Athertons about the car and they said they didn't know what he was talking about. That was that.

Banks supposed it was remotely possible that whoever was in the red Volkswagen had killed Joseph Atherton. But why would his parents lie? According to the statement, they spent the evening together at the farm eating dinner, catching up on family news, then Joseph went up to his room to unpack and came down in his stockinged feet. Maybe he'd been smoking marijuana, as Gristhorpe suggested. Anyway, he slipped at the top of the stairs and broke his neck. It was tragic, but hardly what Banks was looking for.

He heard a sound at the door and looked up to see Susan Gay.

"Found anything, sir?" she asked.

"Maybe," said Banks. "One or two loose ends. But I haven't a clue what it all means, if anything. I'm beginning to wish I'd never seen Mr. Jerry Singer."

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Susan smiled. "Do you know, sir," she said, "he almost had me believing him."

Banks put the file aside. "Did he? I suppose it always pays to keep an open mind," he said. "That's why we're going to visit Mrs. Atherton."

5.

The Atherton farm was every bit as isolated as Gristhorpe had said, and the relentless rain had muddied the lane. At one point, Banks thought they would have to get out and push, but on the third try, the wheels caught and the car lurched forward.

The farmyard looked neglected: bedraggled weeds poked through the mud, part of the barn roof had collapsed, and the wheels and tines of the old hayrake had rusted.

Mrs. Atherton answered their knock almost immediately. Banks had phoned ahead so their arrival wouldn't frighten her. After all, a woman living alone in such a wild place couldn't be too careful.

She led them into the large kitchen and put the kettle on the Aga. The stone-walled room looked clean and tidy enough, but Banks noted an underlying smell, like old greens and meat rotting under the sink.

Mrs. Atherton carried the aura of the sickroom about with her. Her complexion was as grey as her sparse hair; her eyes were dull yellow with milky blue irises; and the skin below them looked dark as a bruise. As she made the tea, she moved slowly, as if measuring the energy required for each step. How on earth, Banks wondered, did she manage up here all by herself? Yorkshire grit was legendary, and as often close to foolhardiness as anything else, he thought.

She put the teapot on the table. "We'll just let it mash a minute," she said. "Now, what is it you want to talk to me about?"

Banks didn't know how to begin. He had no intention of telling Mrs. Atherton about Jerry Singer's "previous lifetime," or of interrogating her about her son's death. Which didn't leave him many options.

"How are you managing?" he asked first.

"Mustn't grumble."

"It must be hard, taking care of this place all by yourself?"

"Nay, there's not much to do these days. Jack Crocker keeps an eye on the sheep. I've nobbut got a few cows to milk."

"No poultry?"

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"Nay, it's not worth it anymore, not with these battery farms. Anyway, seeing as you're a copper, I don't suppose you came to talk to me about the farming life, did you? Come on, spit it out, lad."

Banks noticed Susan look down and smile. "Well," he said, "I hate to bring up a painful subject, but it's your son's death we want to talk to you about."

Mrs. Atherton looked at Susan as if noticing her for the first time. A shadow crossed her face. Then she turned back to Banks. "Our Joseph?" she said. "But he's been dead nigh on twenty-five years."

"I know that," said Banks. "We won't trouble you for long."

"There's nowt else to add." She poured the tea, fussed with milk and sugar, and sat down again.

"You said your son wrote and said he was coming."

"Aye."

"Did you keep the letter?"

"What?"

"The letter. I've not seen any mention of it anywhere. It's not in the file."

"Well, it wouldn't be, would it? We don't leave scraps of paper cluttering up the place."

"So you threw it out?"

"Aye. Bert or me." She looked at Susan again. "That was my husband, God rest his soul. Besides," she said, "how else would we know he was coming? We couldn't afford a telephone back then."

"I know," said Banks. But nobody had asked at the railway station whether Bert Atherton actually *had* met his son there, and now it was too late. He sipped some tea; it tasted as if the teabag had been used before. "I don't suppose you remember seeing a red Volkswagen in the area around that time, do you?"

"No. They asked us that when it first happened. I didn't know owt about it then, and I don't know owt now."

"Was there anyone else in the house when the accident occurred?"

"No, of course there weren't. Do you think I wouldn't have said if there were? Look, young man, what are you getting at? Do you have summat to tell me, summat I should know?"

Banks sighed and took another sip of weak tea. It didn't wash away the taste of decay that permeated the kitchen. He signaled to Susan and stood up. "No," he said. "No, I've nothing new to tell you, Mrs. Atherton. Just chasing will-o'-the-wisps, that's all."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you'll have to go chase 'em somewhere else, lad. I've got work to do."

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6.

The Queen's Arms was quiet late that afternoon. Rain had kept the tourists away, and at four o'clock most of the locals were still at work in the offices and shops around the market square. Banks ordered a pork pie, then he and Jenny Fuller took their drinks to an isolated corner table and settled down. The first long draught of Theakston's bitter washed the archive dust and the taste of decay from Banks's throat.

"Well," said Jenny, raising her glass of lager in a toast. "To what do I owe the honor?"

She looked radiant, Banks thought: thick red hair tumbling over her shoulders, emerald-green eyes full of humor and vitality, a fresh scent that cut through the atmosphere of stale smoke and made him think of childhood apple orchards. Though Banks was married, he and Jenny had once come very close to getting involved, and every now and then he felt a pang of regret for the road not taken.

"Reincarnation," said Banks, clinking glasses.

Jenny raised her eyebrows. "You know I'll drink to most things," she said, "but really, Alan, isn't this going a bit far?"

Banks explained what had happened so far that day. By the time he had finished, the barman delivered his pork pie, along with a large pickled onion. As Jenny mulled over what he had said, he sliced the pie into quarters and shook a dollop of HP Sauce onto his plate to dip them in.

"Fantasy," she said finally.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"If you don't believe in reincarnation, then there are an awful lot of strange phenomena you have to explain in more rational ways. Now, I'm no expert on parapsychology, but most people who claim to have lived past lifetimes generally become convinced through hypnosis, dreams, and déjà vu experiences like the ones you mentioned, or by spontaneous recall."

"What's that?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Suddenly remembering past lifetimes out of the blue. Children playing the piano without lessons, people suddenly speaking foreign languages, that kind of thing. Or any memory you have but can't explain, something that seems to have come from beyond your experience."

"You mean if I'm walking down the street and I suddenly think of a Roman soldier and remember some sort of Latin phrase, then I'm recalling a previous lifetime?"

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Jenny gave him a withering look. "Don't be so silly, Alan. Of course *I* don't think that. Some people might, though. People are limitlessly gullible, it seems to me, especially when it comes to life after death. No, what I mean is that this is the kind of thing believers try to put forward as proof of reincarnation."

"And how would a rational psychologist explain it?"

"She might argue that what a person recalls under hypnosis, in dreams, or whenever, is simply a web of fantasy woven from things that person has already seen or heard and maybe forgotten."

"But he says he's never been here before."

"There's television, books, films."

Banks finished his pork pie, took a swig of Theakston's, and lit a Silk Cut. "So you're saying that maybe our Mr. Singer had watched one too many episodes of *All Creatures Great and Small?*"

Jenny tossed back her hair and laughed. "It wouldn't surprise me." She looked at her watch, then drained her glass. "Look, I'm sorry, but I must dash." And with that she jumped up, pecked him on the cheek, and left. Jenny was always dashing, it seemed.

Banks thought over what she had said. It made sense. More sense than Singer's reincarnation theory and more sense than suspecting Joseph Atherton's parents of covering up his murder.

But there remained the unsubstantiated story of the letter and the anonymous note about the red Volkswagen. If somebody else had driven Joseph Atherton to the farm, then his parents had been lying about the letter. Why? And who could it have been?

7.

Two days later, sorting through his post, Banks found a letter addressed to him in longhand. It stood out like a sore thumb among the usual bundle of circulars and official communications. He spread it open on his desk in front of him and read.

> Dear Mr. Banks,
>
> I'm not much of a one for letter writing so you must forgive me any mistakes. I didn't get much schooling due to me being a sickly child but my father always told us it was important to read and write. Your visit last week upset me by raking up the past I'd rather forget. I don't know what made you come and ask those questions but they made me think it is time to make my peace with God and tell the truth after all these years.
>
> What we told the police was not true. Our Joseph didn't write to say he was coming and Bert didn't pick him up at the station.

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Joseph just turned up out of the blue one afternoon in that red car. I don't know who told the police about the car but I think it might have been Len Grimond in the farm down the road because he had fallen out with Bert over paying for repairs to a wall.

Anyway, it wasn't our Joseph's car. There was an American lass with him called Annie and she was driving. They had a baby with them that they said was theirs. I suppose that made him our grandson but it was the first time we ever heard about him. Our Joseph hadn't written or visited us for four years and we didn't know if he was alive or dead. The child was a bonny little lad about two or three with the most solemn look on his face.

Well it was plain from the start that something was wrong. We tried to behave like good loving parents and welcome them into our home but the girl was moody and she didn't want to stay. The baby cried a lot and I don't think he had been looked after properly, though it's not my place to say. And Joseph was behaving very peculiar. His eyes looked all glassy with tiny pupils. We didn't know what was the matter. I think from what he said that he just wanted money.

They wouldn't eat much though I cooked a good roast for them, and Yorkshire puddings too, but our Joseph just picked at his food and the girl sat there all sulky holding the baby and wanting to go. She said she was a vegetarian. After we'd finished the dinner Joseph got very upset and said he had to go to the toilet. By then Bert was wondering what was going on and also a bit angry at how they treated our hospitality even if Joseph was our son.

Joseph was a long time in the toilet. Bert called up to him but he didn't answer. The girl said something about leaving him alone and laughed, but it wasn't a nice laugh. We thought something might be wrong with him so Bert went up and found Joseph with a piece of string tied around his arm heating something in a spoon with a match. It was one of our silver anniversary spoons he had taken from the kitchen without asking. We were just ignorant farmers and didn't know what was happening in crime and drugs and everything like you do, Mr. Banks, but we knew our Joseph was doing something bad.

Bert lost his temper and pulled Joseph out of the toilet. When they were at the top of the stairs, Joseph started swearing at his father, using such words I've never heard before and would blush to repeat. That's when Bert lost his temper and hit him. On God's honor, he didn't mean to hurt him. Joseph was our only son and we loved him even though he was breaking our

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hearts. But when Bert hit him Joseph fell down the stairs and when he got to the bottom his head was at such a funny angle I knew he must have broken his neck.

The girl started screaming then took the baby and ran outside and drove away. We have never seen her again or our grandson and don't know what has become of him. There was such a silence like you have never heard when the sound of the car engine vanished in the distance and Joseph was laying at the bottom of the stairs all twisted and broken. We tried to feel his pulse and Bert even put a mirror to his mouth to see if his breath would mist it but there was nothing.

I know we should have told the truth and we have regretted it for all those years. We were always brought up to be decent honest folk respecting our parents and God and the law. Bert was ashamed that his son was a drug addict and didn't want it in the papers. I didn't want him to go to jail for what he had done because it was really an accident and it wasn't fair. He was suffering more than enough anyway because he had killed his only son.

So I said we must throw away all the drugs and needle and things and take our Joseph's shoes off and say he slipped coming down the stairs. We knew that the police would believe us because we were good people and we had no reason to lie. That was the hardest part. The laces got tied in knots and I broke my fingernails and in the end I was shaking so much I had to use the scissors.

And that is God's honest truth, Mr. Banks. I know we did wrong but Bert was never the same after. Not a day went by when he didn't cry about what he'd done and I never saw him smile ever again. To this day I still do not know what has become of our grandson but whatever it is I hope he is healthy and happy and not as foolish as his father.

By the time you read this letter I'll be gone to my resting place too. For two years now I have had cancer and no matter what operations they do it is eating me away. I have saved my tablets. Now that I have taken the weight off my conscience I can only hope that the good Lord sees fit to forgive me my sins and take me unto His bosom.

Yours sincerely,
Betty Atherton

Banks put the letter aside and rubbed his left eye with the back of his hand. Outside, the rain was still falling, providing a gentle

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background for Finzi's "Clarinet Concerto" on the portable cassette player. Banks stared at the sheets of blue vellum covered in Betty Atherton's crabbed hand, then he cursed, slammed his fist on the desk, went to the door, and shouted for Susan Gay.

8.

"Her name is Catherine Anne Singer," said Susan Gay the next afternoon. "And she was relieved to talk to me as soon as I told her we weren't after her for leaving the scene of a crime. She comes from somewhere called Garden Grove, California. Like a lot of young Americans, she came over to 'do' Europe."

The three of them—Banks, Susan, and Jenny Fuller—sat over drinks at a dimpled, copper-topped table in the Queen's Arms, listening to the summer rain tap against the diamonds of colored glass.

"And she's Jerry Singer's mother?" Banks asked.

Susan nodded. "Yes. I just asked him for her telephone number. I didn't tell him why I wanted it."

Banks nodded. "Good. Go on."

"Well, she ended up living in London. It was easy enough to get jobs that paid under-the-counter, places where nobody asked too many questions. Eventually, she hooked up with Joseph Atherton and they lived together in a bedsit in Notting Hill Gate. Joseph fancied himself as a musician then—"

"Who didn't?" said Banks. He remembered taking a few abortive guitar lessons himself in nineteen sixty-six. "Sorry. Go on."

"There's not a lot to add, sir. She got pregnant, wouldn't agree to an abortion, though apparently Joseph tried to persuade her. She named the child Jerry, after some guitarist Joseph liked called Jerry Gambia. Luckily for Jerry, Annie wasn't on heroin. She drew the line at hash and LSD. Anyway, they were off to join some Buddhist commune in the wilds of Scotland when Joseph said they should drop in on his parents on the way and try to get some money. She didn't like the idea, but she went along with it anyway.

"Everything happened exactly as Mrs. Atherton described it. Annie got scared and ran away. When she got back to London, she decided it was time to go home. She sold the car and took out all her savings from the bank, then she got the first flight she could and settled back in California. She went to university and ended up working as a marine biologist in San Diego. She never married, and she never mentioned her time in England, or that night at the Atherton farm, to Jerry. She told him his father had left them when

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Jerry was still a baby. He was only two and a half at the time of Atherton's death, and as far as he was concerned, he had spent his entire life in Southern California."

Banks drained his pint and looked at Jenny.

"Cryptomnesia," she said.

"Come again?"

"Cryptomnesia. It means memories you're not consciously aware of, a memory of an incident in your own life that you've forgotten. Jerry Singer was present when his grandfather knocked his father down the stairs, but as far as he was concerned *consciously,* he'd never been to Swainsdale before, so how could he remember it? When he got mixed up in the New Age scene, these memories he didn't know he had started to seem like some sort of proof of reincarnation."

Sometimes, Banks thought to himself, things are better left alone. The thought surprised him because it went against the grain of both his job and his innate curiosity. But what good had come from Jerry Singer's presenting himself at the station three days ago? None at all. Perhaps the only blessing in the whole affair was that Betty Atherton had passed away peacefully, as she had intended, in her pill-induced sleep. Now she wouldn't suffer any more in this world. And if there was a God, Banks thought, He surely couldn't be such a bastard as to let her suffer in the next one either.

"Sir."

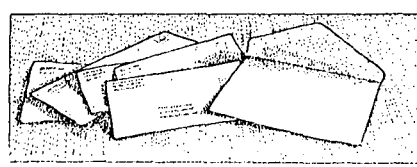
"Sorry, Susan, I was miles away."

"I asked who was going to tell him. You or me?"

"I'll do it," said Banks, with a sigh. "It's no good trying to sit on it all now. But I need another pint first. My shout."

As he stood up to go to the bar, the door opened and Jerry Singer walked in. He spotted them at once and walked over. He had that strange naive-intense look in his eyes. Banks instinctively reached for his cigarettes.

"They told me you were here," Singer said awkwardly, pointing back through the door towards the Tudor-fronted police station across the street. "I'm leaving for home tomorrow and I was just wondering if you'd found anything out yet?"



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We've remarked before in these introductions on how lively a locale for crime writing Rochester, New York, has become. This month another of the city's denizens makes a debut for EQMM. *The author, who prefers to write under a pseudonym, is a student of Rochester's Steven Wilcox, creator of a mystery series set in the Adirondacks . . .*

THE FRENCH WAY

by C. E. STUTZ

She had chosen this spot, at the northernmost edge of the wide white beach, because here a scattering of rocks thrust up a few feet above the fine sand to provide some cover. Now, surprised to see that two people were swimming the fifty yards from a dark blue yawl in to the beach, Rita Keynes reflected that even paradise had less privacy than she had thought.

She was discomfited because she had decided to try sunbathing the French way. These Frenchwomen, she had observed with some envy at their sang-froid, threw off their tops the minute they hit the beach.

Of course, most of them had the tan for it. There were parts of Rita that had never seen daylight, and she wasn't anxious to bring her vacation to a painful halt. She was therefore trying this experiment at nine A.M., with the strong Caribbean sun just making its appearance above the hills behind her. She would retreat to the shade of the town at noon, when the dedicated sun worshipers arrived.

It had taken her half an hour to reach this, the least accessible of St. Barth's beaches. The trail wound around the point, hugging the rugged hillside as though to keep from falling into the bright blue sea. It ended in a flight of steep stone steps leading to the sand.

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She had encamped a few yards from the steps, close enough to observe anyone approaching if she peeked over the rocks, but far enough to remain unobserved herself. Most people would head for the southern end of the beach, where the cliff fell away into gentle dunes and palm trees ringed the sand.

When she arrived, the beach was deserted, but a half-dozen boats, some not much smaller than the one in which Columbus slipped into this natural harbor, lay anchored from the previous evening. It was from one of these that the couple had emerged and slipped into the water.

Sitting up a little, Rita watched the man and woman stagger in the waves as they made their way onto the beach. The woman had the indefinable but unmistakable look of Frenchness, and not only because she was never going to wear out the top half of her bathing suit. Her wet, dark hair flowed back from her face in a way that appeared sensuous rather than drowned, and her teeth flashed perfectly white when she laughed. The man, even more bronze than she, was laughing too, as he ran toward her with the strong stride of a natural athlete. It was the laughter of people who are in love and in the Caribbean at the same time, and Rita felt an unexpected pang.

The two of them ran up the beach—damn, right toward Rita. She reached for the black-and-white striped bikini top, then checked herself. They probably wouldn't see her behind the rocks, and if they did, well, *c'est la vie.*

She listened without embarrassment to their conversation, telling herself she was practicing her French.

"Paula, wait for me!" The French pronunciation of the name, Powla, sounded exotic to Rita's ears.

"Stop it, Marc!" A rich, silky voice, combining playfulness and imperiousness. "Francine and Claude will be coming out any minute."

The couple turned before they reached the rocks that sheltered Rita and ran up the steps, disappearing over the steep rise. The breeze coming off the hills wafted Marc's voice down to Rita.

"Why worry? It'll take hours for Claude to get that motor started. Paula, I haven't been alone with you for days . . ."

So that was it. Two couples on vacation together, good friends perhaps, but still tiring of the lack of privacy. These two had swum out before the others were ready so that they could revel in each other.

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"I didn't think you cared. You've hardly looked at me. I really think Claude has paid more attention to me than you have!"

In the Frenchwoman's voice, Rita recognized that sudden poutyness with which some women could reduce men to rubble. Rita knew instinctively that no man would ever put up with that from herself; it was a knack you had to be born with. Or maybe it could be absorbed with the suntan.

The voices grew more excited, quicker, and harder for Rita to translate. She caught "unreasonable," "don't really love me," and finally managed to make out "supposed to be a second honeymoon, after all." Then she heard *"garce,"* and searched her memory for a word that she had learned not in her lessons but from a book of French slang: "bitch."

Oh-oh, you blew it, Rita thought. He wasn't in the mood for jealousy, and now you've got him mad.

"Don't touch me!" Paula's voice came to Rita clearly, and was followed by the sharp sound of a slap. Rita's skin tensed with a sudden chill. She propped herself on her elbow and turned her head to stare up behind her. The cliff blocked her view; she could see only the calm blue sky. Not even a seabird's cry broke the silence.

Then she could hear their voices again, much different, taut with suppressed excitement.

Rita breathed again, inhaling air rich with bougainvillea, the sea, and something else, a heavy floral scent unlike any flower on the island. Paula's perfume? How could a woman keep her scent after swimming in the sea? She supposed the French had their ways.

With a mixture of embarrassment and envy, Rita heard from above the unmistakable sounds of sex, and incredibly good sex at that. It was certainly too late to cough politely to announce her presence. They wouldn't have noticed her if she'd pulled out a bugle and played it while turning cartwheels.

Unbelievable, these French. To go from one passion to another like one more course in a leisurely lunch. Rita tried to listen instead to the gentle waves that swelled onto the beach. They broke into crests and ran toward her in a dancing white foam, like champagne.

A sudden, overwhelming bitterness surprised her. She had had pleasant and satisfying love affairs, all of which had eventually ended in a pleasant and satisfying way, leaving her with neither regrets nor encumbrances. Never, she now realized, had she known this kind of absorbed passion.

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Out in the bay, there were stirrings aboard the blue yawl. A motor coughed, and finally burst into a low purr. A Zodiac with gray pontoons and two passengers moved sedately toward the shore. Francine and Claude, no doubt.

As they drew closer, Rita could see that Claude was older than Marc, with coppery-red hair matched by a skin that did not take the sun well. Rita at first assumed Francine, in a conspicuously one-piece bathing suit, was also older than the other woman, but soon perceived that she only had an older demeanor. The small blonde sat very upright in the boat, scanning the shoreline for possible dangers, as though a tiger might leap from the palms.

The couple above Rita had fallen quiet. By the time the Zodiac was pulled up and tied to a rock not far from Rita, making it all but invisible, they had emerged and discreetly descended the steps.

"Paula and I, we found the trail that goes around the point." That was Marc's voice, higher and more deliberately cheerful now that he was talking to the others. Rita thought he must be the energetic activities coordinator of the foursome, an impression he confirmed with a suggestion delivered as a certainty: "We can walk into town for lunch."

"It looks awfully steep." Francine's soft voice was just discernible.

"Poor Francine, you and your fear of heights. Don't worry, most of it isn't bad. If the goats can climb it, so can we!" There was laughter all around, except for the worried murmuring of Francine. This eventually died out, replaced by the sounds of blankets being flapped open.

The two couples settled into the usual beach routine, intermittently lying silent in the sun and then venturing into the turquoise water, singly, in couples, and once all together. While they were on the beach, Rita could only hear them, but when they moved out into the water, an opening in the rocks in her line of sight gave her the chance to see them as well. She thought that Marc and Paula now behaved more sedately, as though falling in with the habits of their more staid friends.

As she covertly watched them, Rita began to notice that Paula was paying attention to Claude, going into the water when he did, laughing a little more appreciatively at his joking.

Rita indulged in a peek over the rocks to look at Marc. He lay on the blanket, watching Paula and Claude as they frolicked in the water. Rita could see his eyes quite clearly. Their cold fury made her wonder whether passion was really worth the price.

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Rita felt no need to head for the water, in spite of the rising sun. It seemed that she was melting into this land, her bones turning to sand and running away from her like time, down the sloping beach into the foam.

When the sun stood overhead, there was a flurry of discussion among the foursome—"lunch in town," "only about a twenty-minute walk," "too hot," and "bottle of Sauvignon Blanc will take care of" all came to Rita's ears. Eventually they gathered themselves and started up the steps to the path.

After a few minutes Rita decided that lunch alone was better than frying alone. She slipped into her shirt and shorts, laced up her espadrilles, and grabbed her sisal bag, all she would need for any restaurant in town. She adjusted her wide-brimmed straw hat and mounted the steps.

As she reached the top, Claude came trotting back, searching his pockets. When he caught sight of her he looked puzzled, as though she'd fallen from the sky. He murmured an accented, "Good afternoon."

They always did that, took one look at her and then spoke English. They seemed to know an American by the cut of her clothes.

"Bonjour, monsieur." Rita was not to be deterred from her foray into things foreign. She searched for and found the French words necessary to ask if he'd forgotten something.

He smiled—was her accent funny, or was it just the Frenchman's habit of smiling at all women?

"Oui, madame. Ma chéquier." He slapped his pockets.

Rita managed to find the words to say that he would, *mais oui,* need his checkbook anywhere on this island except the beach, and they parted laughing. Flirting was surprisingly easy in French. Too bad he was spoken for.

Away from the water the sun seemed even more intense. Walking became trudging as she rounded the point, and she paused before starting up the steepest part of the path. Looking up, she could see the figure of one of the foursome—was it Francine?—just disappearing into the crags.

Rita remembered that part of the trail from her morning's hike. It wound through the rocks, and led past a cave in the hillside. From the trail just beyond the cave's mouth, one could look straight down into the impossibly bright blue waves as they thundered against the base of the hill, wearing it ever so slowly into sand.

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The morning scent of flowers no longer came to her; perhaps they had folded up against the midday sun. As she walked through the odd mix of cacti and deciduous scrub trees she could smell dead leaves, reminding her unexpectedly of autumn back north. The dry rustlings could almost be squirrels or sparrows instead of lizards.

Rita stopped dead, startled and confused by a sudden, sharp cry. No, a scream. Not a seabird, not a hawk. A woman.

She could see nothing ahead but the trail winding up the hill above her, and the empty sea below. She started running, struggling uphill, her bag banging against her ribs. She gained the top of the hill, near the cave, and almost slammed into Marc.

He stood leaning his hands against the rocks, looking down into the sea. When he turned and focused on her, the tanned face was drained pale and gray. He swallowed once, and blurted out:

"Ma femme . . . my wife, she's fallen!"

Rita stared straight down the rocks into the sea, and felt a wave of dizziness. She looked wildly up and down the path—equally distant from the town and the ships with their radios. She tried to remember if she had ever seen such a thing as an ambulance on St. Barth's. Finally it came to her that it didn't matter. That lovely dark-haired woman would never need an ambulance now. Nothing could have broken her fall from this place.

"We must call . . . " she began, then struggled for the word for police, wondering why it had never been in any of her lessons. *"Gendarmerie."*

Marc stared at her, then slowly nodded. He turned to look behind him. Rita followed his gaze, and saw for the first time the woman sitting on a rock under the low roof of the small cave.

The woman sat very still, the laughter of the morning stilled. She had slipped on a short dress to go into town, but in the cool air of the cave it was obvious she still wore nothing underneath. She looked up into Marc's eyes with a solemn intensity, strong as the Caribbean sun.

"Paula, stay here," Marc said to her. "Claude and I will get to the boat and call for help."

Rita blurted, *"Votre femme . . .* your wife . . ."

"My wife was looking out to sea while she climbed over the rocks," Marc said. "My poor Francine, she slipped and fell."

Then he was gone, moving like a sleepwalker toward the beach.

She thought of Francine, with her fear of heights, walking this part of the trail. Never would Francine have looked out to sea, never

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would she have leaned toward such danger. She would have kept her eyes on the ground, placing every careful step with terror, noticing nothing else until a single sharp shove . . .

Rita stood as Marc had done, but with her back firmly against the security of the rock, set against the crashing sea. She became as still as the Frenchwoman seated across the path from her like a reflection.

She tried to think of the words she would need to say to the *gendarme*

DETECTIVERSE

MURDER MOST FOWL

by BOB PERKINS

The raven sat behind the bench
And called the court in session.
"We'll prove Cock Robin's killer's guilt
With or without confession."

The Magpie rose with folded wings
And started with his plea.
"It's true we had a fight that night,
But the killer isn't me.

Cock Robin flirted with this chick,
Her boyfriend got offended.
He drew his gun and fired once,
Poor Robin's life was ended.

That dirty bird's your man, I say,
And if your doubt still lingers,
Here's proof I didn't pull that trigger,
I haven't any fingers."

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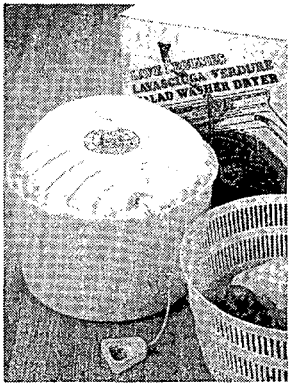

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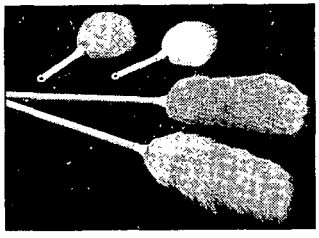

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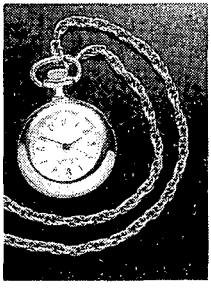

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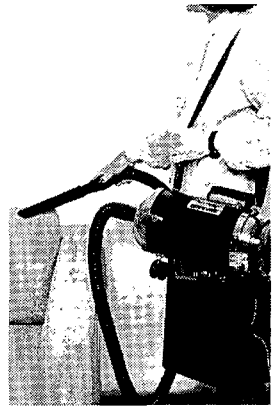

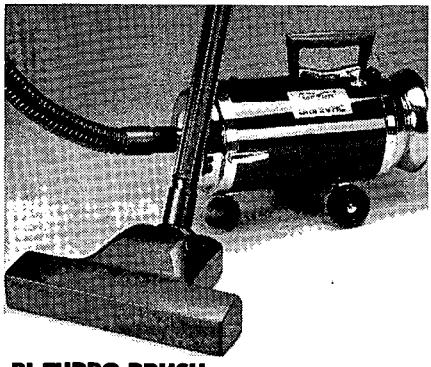

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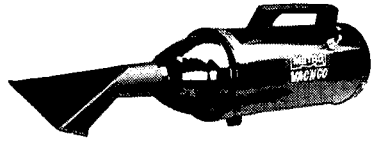

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To whet your appetite for next month's Christmas issue, we turn to James Powell, who has obliged us with an offbeat tale of a pet shop on Christmas Eve. The story takes its lead from an old legend about the powers of our animal friends on that special night . . .

MIDNIGHT AT MANGER'S BIRD AND BEAST

by JAMES POWELL

On that particular night before Christmas the wind carried the sound of St. Clement's clock as far as the old shopping mall. Hearing it strike a quarter to twelve, Raymond Manger looked up from the desk he'd tucked into the corner of the pet-store stockroom. In the circle of light from the gooseneck lamp lay the papers he'd been sorting through, the last of the tax things for the accountant. Manger churned his shoulders to ease the stiffness in his neck. He was tired and in rather low spirits. Florence, his wife, had gone back East to be with her ailing mother. Manger would be spending his first Christmas alone in over thirty years. He'd tended the Bird and Beast by himself all day. But things had been so slow he'd closed up early, driven to Star City, the new shopping mall, and eaten at the Italian restaurant there. Then, rather than go back to an empty house, he'd returned to the Bird and Beast to finish up the paperwork.

Manger leaned back in his chair and thought about business. A quick after-dinner walk through the new mall's festive, crowded corridors assured him once more that his decision to move the pet shop there was a sound one. Even Star City's Christmas decorations worked a tinsel magic quite beyond the old mall's threadbare silver and gold. When Florence saw the way business picked up, she'd have to admit he was right. Decisions about their future needed to be made in a levelheaded, unemotional way. With this comforting thought Manger closed his eyes. Only for a minute, he told himself.

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In the pet shop a puppy yelped in its sleep (was it the beagle so given to dreams?), the old parrot swung on its noisy trapeze, and something set the tiny finches to whirring about in their large cage. Manger fell asleep imagining he could even hear the hamster in the display window plop down some tubular crook in its transparent maze.

"Hey, Ray! Rise and shine, Ray!"

Manger thought he recognized the raucous voice that woke him.

"That's right, Ray," came the voice again. "It's me. It's Nipper. Out here in the shop."

Amazed, Manger jumped up and went to the stockroom door. For all the years he'd been trying to sell that old African gray parrot he'd never heard it say anything but a trite "Polly want a cracker." And it liked to nip, a habit that had made the bird the most returned item in the shop. So Manger, who usually didn't have animals long enough to name them, started calling it "Nipper." When customers were out of earshot.

Manger peered into the shop proper and called the parrot's name. He could make out the bird on its trapeze stand in the front of the store beckoning to him with a wing.

"Come on in, Ray," called Nipper.

Manger preferred to be called Raymond. Florence and her mother always called him Raymond. But under these most curious circumstances he let it pass. Turning on the overhead lights, he walked down the center aisle between the displays of dog food and kitty litter bags, between the tanks of tropical fish and reptiles, the cages of sleeping puppies and kittens. As he passed, the colored finches and the macaws turned their heads to follow him. The hamsters sat up on their haunches, and the white mice peeked out from the wood shavings on the bottom of their cages.

Manger had placed the bird's perch down by the cash register as part of his strategy to sell it. The Siamese cat was stretched out on the counter close by. It blinked at Manger. Florence had more or less adopted the animal, christened it Lilac, and given it the run of the shop.

Nipper said, "Surprise, surprise, Ray."

Manger smiled a bit nervously at the wonderful bird. "You've found yourself some vocabulary, Nip."

" 'Tis the season," said the bird, giving him a mischievous look. It raised the leg which wasn't chained to the stand and scratched its beak.

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"Hello, Ray," said Lilac the Siamese.

Manger jumped a mile. "You can talk, too?"

"No," said the cat. "The parrot's a ventriloquist." Laughter of every size, shape, and register rang out around the shop.

Manger didn't laugh. He didn't know many jokes. But even he knew that one. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

"Don't get your shirt in a knot, Ray," said Nipper. "You've heard the story of how animals get to talk on Christmas Day during the midnight hour."

"I guess," admitted Manger. "Somewhere. But I was never much for stuff like that. It isn't reasonable."

"Good for you," said Nipper. "You're damn right. It's a stupid story. Like most of the rubbish you human beings dream up. The straight fact is we animals talk all the time. But once a year there's this miracle and you people can understand us. But I got to be frank, Ray. Come miracle time we generally clam up with people around. Astonishment and disbelief followed by a lot of condescending twaddle. Who needs it? It's very boring."

Manger found the parrot's tone irritating. "I didn't ask you to wake me up, you know."

Nipper rolled its eyes and laid a wing across its wounded heart. "Touché, Ray. You have me there."

"Maybe we're trying to do you a favor here, Ray," suggested Lilac. "Maybe we feel sorry for you."

"So I'm alone for the holidays. It's no big deal. Florence is visiting her sick mother."

"We know all about that, Raymond," came a small, baritone voice behind him. Manger spun around. The speaker was the hamster in the display window. It stood erect, halfway out of an upright tube in its plastic maze, looking like a submarine captain on his conning tower.

Lilac rose respectfully and performed what might have been a cat curtsey. Nipper bowed and nudged Manger to do the same. "Ray," it said out of the side of its beak, "this is His Royal Highness Button-Eyes the Thirty-seventh, King of the Hamsters."

Manger had always thought the creature had a kind of presence, an air of authority the others didn't. That was why he'd put it in the display window. He made his best try at a bow.

Nipper said, "We figured it'd be less of a shock to your system if I started off the talking, Ray. But His Highness here is the one we chose to be our official spokesman."

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The Hamster King leaped effortlessly from tube to counter and mounted the keys on the curved front of the old-fashioned cash register as if they were the steps up to a throne. At the top it turned and sat down. "We are pleased to have this opportunity to speak to you, Raymond," said Button-Eyes the Thirty-seventh. "This is a very serious matter. But since you are here tonight at this time, clearly you have been given one last chance."

Manger had expected complaints about the food or the cage litter. "A very serious matter? One last chance? What the hell are you talking about, Your Majesty?"

"We admire your democratic tone, Raymond. We are pleased our regal presence does not intimidate you," said the Hamster King. "Now may we ask you to reflect a moment and tell us what you think would become of your immortal soul if you were to die tonight?"

Manger looked confused. Then he thought for a bit. "Well, I've never claimed to be a saint, but I guess I'm not much of a sinner either."

"That's what you think, Ray," observed Lilac.

"The boy scouts don't hand out merit badges for complicity in murder," said Nipper.

Manger's laughter was quick and relieved. "You've got me confused with another guy. What murder? I was never involved in murdering anybody."

"Complicity before the fact is complicity nevertheless," insisted the Hamster King. "Raymond, you have been so utterly blind and inconsiderate that you have driven your wife to hire a man to kill you."

"Florence? You're crazy," insisted Manger.

The Hamster King gave him a sad look. "No, Raymond, it was my great-great-grandfather Button-Eyes the Thirty-third who was crazy. Or rather, experienced delusional episodes, including the time he mistook a rubber-tree plant for Frederick the Great. We are sure if you knew how painful the subject is you would not have reminded us."

"Causing pain's this guy's middle name, Your Majesty," said Lilac. "Florence has been unhappy and homesick for a very long time. He's caused that lady a world of heartache and untold grief."

Manger denied these words with a shake of his head. "Hire somebody to kill me? Florence would never do that." But inwardly he had to admit things had been strained between himself and his wife for quite a while now. He wanted to use the inheritance from her

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Uncle Edgar to move the Bird and Beast to the new shopping mall. She wanted to use it to retire. She wanted them to move back East so she could be with her mother. But as he had explained to her so many times, it made more sense to bring her mother back here. They had plenty of room since the kids grew up and left home. A few years at the new mall and they could sell the business for a good profit. After a while Florence had stopped arguing. It wasn't their first big disagreement in recent years.

The Hamster King said, "Your wife's gentle and considerate ways are well known to us. In fact, if we may digress, her sterling qualities once made us hope she might assist us in a certain royal dilemma. Oh, the hamster ladies here in the shop are as plump and pretty a bevy as one could find anywhere." There was much tittering and giggling from the hamster cage at this. "We, however, have the royal succession to consider. We must wed a noble hamster maiden, one from the New Hampshire Hamster Ranch bloodline. We had hoped Florence would choose a consort for us from their catalog. Our family is quite used to arranged marriages. But as hard as we concentrated, alas, we were never able to put the idea into her head. A pity, because the matchmaker's portion from the Hamster Trove would have ended all your financial worries."

"The Hamster Trove?"

Lilac explained, "For thousands of years hamsters have been scouring floors for lost coins, precious stones and pearls fallen from rings, gold fillings from teeth. They're the richest creatures on earth, Ray. And it's all there to reward those who help the King of the Hamsters."

Manger's head sagged. "You mustn't blame Florence, Your Majesty," he admitted. "You did put the idea into her head. Awhile back she brought the New Hampshire Hamster Ranch catalog down to breakfast. She wanted us to buy one of the females. She showed me its picture. 'Little Ears,' I think it was called."

"Could it have been 'Tiny Ears'?" gasped the Hamster King in a voice constricted by emotion.

"Whatever," said Manger. "Anyway, I told her the stuff in the catalog was too damn expensive. I told her it was silly to buy something just because it's cute. I said you can't run a business like that."

The King of Hamsters sighed. "Last spring a bird flew into the mall. I heard it sing of Tiny Ears's beauty." The little creature turned away to hide the tears welling up in its eyes.

Lilac and Nipper looked daggers at Manger.

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"Your Highness," said Manger, "I promise I'll put the order in first thing in the morning. Tiny Ears will be your bride." The King of Hamsters looked sad and made no reply.

Nipper said, "Boy, Ray, you've turned into a real pain in the ass, haven't you? I'm glad I hung around to watch the whole thing play out. So here comes the big finish. Three hours from now, when you're home in bed, you're going to get a visit from a guy dressed up like Saint Nick. He'll enter with the house key your wife gave him and—surprise, surprise—he'll strangle you in your sleep."

"No," said Lilac. "The pistol with the silencer, remember? She was afraid strangling would hurt Ray too much."

"That's right. I forgot. She paid extra for the guy to shoot you, Ray. Then he leaves with a bag filled with valuables, doing a job on the back door with a pry bar to make it look like break-and-enter."

"How do you know all this?"

The Hamster King said, "We keep our eyes and ears open. We see what's going on right under our noses. You should try it sometime, Raymond."

Lilac was working on an ear with a hind leg. She stopped when Manger looked at her. "I don't suppose your heart has ever gone out to those of us who have to sit down every damn time we want to scratch our ears, has it, Ray? No? I thought not. And, oh, by the way, Florence says when you're dead she's going to take me back East with her. I guess you'd say I'm her number one confidant. When she's tending the store alone she often opens her heart to me."

"Or she has her nose in *Mercenary Guys* and *Hired Guns* and magazines like that," added Nipper. "Last Monday when you were visiting the suppliers, the man she chose to do the job came by and they worked the whole thing out."

Manger shook his head in very firm disbelief.

"Why would we lie to you, Ray?" asked Nipper. The cat and the hamster nodded and looked at him with a steady gaze.

Suddenly Manger knew he was being told the truth. It gave him a lot to think about. There was nothing like learning your wife wants you murdered to make a man reexamine his marriage. When he did Manger was obliged to admit that Nipper, Lilac, and the Hamster King were right on the money. He'd turned himself into a damn fool. But he also saw, as if for the first time, how much he loved his wife and how much she had once loved him. And now he'd driven her to the point where she wanted him dead.

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"Look, all right," Manger told the others, "if it means that much to Florence why, hey, we'll retire and move back East. So maybe I'm no great shakes, businesswise. Maybe I wanted so badly to go out a winner I let the important things get away from me."

The three creatures watched him.

Manger thought a bit more. "Well, I sure can't go to the police about this guy in the Santa suit. If they arrest him he might implicate Florence. So I'll just check into a hotel tonight. In the morning I'll phone. I'll tell her I know everything. I'll tell her I understand how rough I've made things for her lately."

"Do you mean you've forgiven her, Raymond?" asked the Hamster King.

"I just hope the hell she forgives me," said Manger.

"We are proud of you, Raymond. If you hadn't forgiven her, then all of this would've been pointless."

"Pointless? I don't get it, Your Highness."

The creatures looked at each other. None of them spoke until Lilac said, "Ray, how about we go back to the stockroom where you can sit down. You're in for a bit of a shock." The cat jumped to the floor and bounded down the aisle without looking back. Nipper undid the clasp that attached its leg chain to the trapeze stand with an effortless twist of the beak and flew after the cat. In a bound the Hamster King was on Manger's shoulder. It waved a royal paw. "We may proceed, Raymond."

So Manger let himself be led to the back of the shop while the creatures along the way called out in their various voices, "Merry Christmas, Ray!"

Manger sat down in the stockroom chair. "Now what's all this about?" The cat jumped up onto his lap and from there up to the desk. Nipper roosted on the neck of the gooseneck lamp. Button-Eyes the Thirty-seventh descended Manger's arm to the desk and took a seat on the box of paper clips. Strange, thought Manger, how whatever the little creature sat on became a throne.

"Raymond," said the Hamster King, "from what you have told us, we believe your immortal soul to be in much less danger than when we started here. That is the good news. The bad news is, you are still going to be murdered when you go home tonight."

Manger laughed. "I'm not that crazy. I told you I'll check into a hotel."

Nipper said, "Ray, in three minutes, when the old clock on the wall strikes one, you'll fall back asleep, and come wake-up time you

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won't remember anything. Nada. Except maybe a vague dream with talking animals in it."

Manger's eyes grew large. "But I don't want to die! I mean, it's not just the dying. It's losing Florence. I want to set things straight with her."

Nipper shrugged. "The not remembering part's written in stone, Ray."

Manger turned to Lilac. "You know how Florence is. If I get murdered, she'll never forgive herself."

"I know," said Lilac. "But there's nothing I can do. Cats aren't hamsters. We're short in the powers of concentration department. We kind of nod off when we try. But maybe some Christmas during the midnight hour I can tell her about right now, how you love her and forgive her."

Manger shook his head. "You'll never wake her up. She sleeps the sleep of the just."

"Maybe not anymore," said Lilac. "Anyway, I'll try my best."

Manger turned and looked down appealingly at the Hamster King. The little creature spread its paws hopelessly. "As powerful as we are, Raymond, we cannot annul this particular law. It comes from an authority even higher than our own."

Manger felt tears burn his eyes and a sharp ache in his throat. Nipper, Lilac, and Button-Eyes the Thirty-seventh watched, moved by his distress. Suddenly Nipper said, "Here's something worth a try, Ray. Grab that pad and pencil. Quick now, write this down. 'I, Ray Manger, will not go home tonight because my wife Florence has hired a man to murder me. I forgive her for this because it is my fault, too.' "

"It just might work, Ray," said Lilac.

The King of the Hamsters cleared his throat hopefully.

Manger understood, and as the second hand swept to the end of the hour he wrote, "And remember to order Tiny Ears for Button-Eyes the Thirty-sev . . ."

Manger woke a little after one in the morning. He smiled. Damn, there was nothing like a nap to lift your spirits and turn your attitude around. He stood up and stretched, feeling that all he needed to be completely happy would be having Florence there. He resolved to call her first thing in the morning and tell her how much he missed her. Call, hell. If he could get a ticket and Archie, the mall

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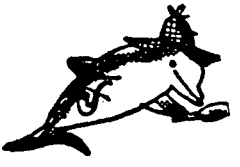
night-watchman, would take care of the animals while he was gone, he'd fly right out to the coast.

Happy with this resolution, Manger took his coat and hat, turned out the stockroom light, and turned on the one in the shop. As he walked toward the front door, the creatures seemed particularly still (all except the beagle puppy, which chased the future in a dream). There by the cash register was good old Nipper on his trapeze roost and pretty little Lilac on the counter. Good old Nipper. Pretty little Lilac? Manger smiled with wonder at himself. But the fact was, at that moment his heart went out to all the animals and to creation itself.

Then Manger reached for the light switch beside the front door and frowned. There was a sheet of paper from a legal pad taped to the inside of the door. Where the hell did that come from? He recognized his own handwriting, but he didn't recall writing it or sticking it up there. He was getting so forgetful maybe Florence was right. Maybe he should retire.

Manger tugged the paper loose. "Polly want a cracker," he read. "Polly want a cracker Polly want a cracker Polly want a cracker." And on and on. What kind of nonsense was that? Then down at the end were these words: "And remember to order Tiny Ears for Button-Eyes the Thirty-sev." Manger laughed out loud. Remember to order *who* for what? He shook his head at his failing mental powers and crumpled the paper into a ball.

Suddenly the hamster in the display window was there at his elbow, halfway out of an upright tube in its maze like a cork in a bottle. Manger saw it cock its head. And, as he reached over the cash register counter and dropped the paper ball into the wastepaper basket there, he thought he heard it sigh. But Manger knew it was only his imagination. How could any creature be sad on a wonderful night like this? "Merry Christmas to all!" he called, taking one last look around the shop. "And God bless us every one!" Then Manger turned out the light, locked the door, and went home to bed.



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Evan Hunter and Donald E. Westlake are a pair of writers with plenty in common. Both are in their sixties, Westlake early and Hunter late; both have been active in the field since the century's fifties, Hunter early and Westlake late. Each has won a Grand Master Edgar Award from Mystery Writers of America. Both wrote quite a few short stories early in their careers, Hunter a major contributor to the great days of *Manhunt* and Westlake to the lesser-known but memorable magazine *Mystery Digest.*

Each is staggeringly prolific, producing a long succession of novels under his own name and various pseudonyms, at least one of which has gained an identity of its own. Although Evan Hunter has long been identified as the author of the 1954 bestseller *The Blackboard Jungle,* his Ed McBain byline, primarily on the 87th Precinct series, has become even more famous, and he has also written as Richard Marsten, Curt Cannon, Hunt Collins, Ezra Hannon, and John Abbott. Westlake's best-known pseudonym, Richard Stark, author of the Parker crook series, has been joined by Tucker Coe, Curt Clark, Timothy J. Culver, and most recently Samuel Holt.

Though both are best known for crime fiction, they have also produced mainstream fiction and (less frequently) western and science fiction. Each usually works alone but has collaborated with another famous mystery writer, Westlake with Brian Garfield on *Gangway!* (1973) and McBain with Craig Rice (albeit posthumously) on her final novel, *The April Robin Murders* (1958). Versatile as they both are, each is considered by many the absolute master of one particular sub-genre, Hunter (as McBain) the police procedural and Westlake the comic caper novel.

Most important, both writers have a mastery of often funny, always lifelike dialogue; a knack of creating characters who jump off the page; and the gift, demonstrated even in their less successful works, of compulsive readability. It is impossible to imagine the history of crime fiction without either of them.

**** Evan Hunter: *Criminal Conversation,* Warner, $21.95. In the first novel as by Hunter since 1984's *Lizzie,* a whopping coincidence sets the plot in motion: Sarah Welles, wife of New York Assistant D.A. Michael, enters an extra-marital affair with Andrew Farrell, not knowing he is really the organized crime boss her husband is trying to nail. The title refers both to an archaic tort ("defilement of the marriage bed . . . *adultery* [as] a civil injury to

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the husband, entitling him to damages") and to the wiretapped colloquies the novel's cops spend so much time listening in on. With the same kind of procedural detail he brings to the McBain novels, Hunter tells us a great deal about the ethics and legalities of court-approved wiretaps, while getting every ounce of suspense out of a sure-fire situation.

**** Donald E. Westlake: *Baby, Would I Lie?,* Mysterious, $19.95. Media representatives descend on Branson, Missouri, for the murder trial of country singer Ray Jones, including the unprincipled scandal mongers from *Weekly Galaxy,* the only-slightly-exaggerated tabloid of the author's *Trust Me On This* (1988). Besides a choice central plot gimmick and a satirical view of the state of American journalism, Westlake has written Jones a great selection of country-western lyrics that should be set to music and recorded without delay.

**** Dianne G. Pugh: *Slow Squeeze,* Pocket, $20. Though investment counselor Iris Thorne qualifies as a contemporary amateur detective (complete with police love interest) and her second adventure has the necessary characteristics of a whodunit, Pugh's approach to her material is strikingly unusual. The characters, including Iris herself, have a lifelike complexity, and the portrait of Los Angeles during the first Rodney King trial and subsequent riots is masterfully drawn. Though the prologue tells us Barbie Stringfellow, a charming but somewhat mysterious Southern widow and Iris's client-turned-clinging-friend, will be the murder victim, the crime itself doesn't take place until after the three-quarter point, with interplay of the characters rather than an investigation the focus of attention. Office sexual harassment and a tangible ethical problem left over from Iris's previous adventure are other plot elements. This is a distinguished crime novel.

*** Robert Irvine: *Barking Dogs,* St. Martin's, $19.95. A writer who, like Westlake above, takes a jaundiced view of the present-day media returns to a TV news background for the first time since *Ratings are Murder* (1985). Field producer Kevin Manwaring and ambitious network reporter Vicki Garcia go to small-town Idaho to cover a forest fire and wind up investigating the destruction of a religious community. Billed by the publisher as the first in a new series, this novel whets the appetite for more.

*** Simon Brett: *A Reconstructed Corpse,* Scribners, $20. Unfortunately, the trend to sensationalistic reality-based TV crime series is not confined to the United States. Actor Charles Paris is hired to play a missing (presumed murdered) man in reconstructions for the *Public Enemies* program, hosted by a game-show star seeking to reestablish his gritty journalistic roots. Between double shots of Bell's and bouts of self-pity, the over-the-hill thespian manages some amateur detective work more effective than

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his norm. This is another winner in one of the most purely entertaining series going.

*** Jane Dentinger: *The Queen is Dead,* Viking, $19.95. In the fifth case for another distinguished theatrical sleuth, actress Jocelyn O'Roarke returns to her upstate New York alma mater to star in a production of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*—replacing former mentor Tessa Grant who has died suddenly and (apparently) unmysteriously. Josh's sometime romantic interest, New York police detective Phillip Gerard, pursues her there hoping to rekindle their romance. Aside from vivid characters and background, Dentinger also provides a well-developed puzzle. Right at home in a pure whodunit is the local police chief, a cop dumb enough to inhabit a B-movie mystery of the thirties or forties.

*** Richard Hoyt: *Red Card,* Forge, $19.95. By the time you read this, the 1994 World Cup will be long over, and I hope it was not accompanied by the kind of carnage described in this book, a stop-the-assassin thriller brimming with soccer lore. Hoyt is a satirist at heart—don't miss a great scene in which the fictional New York *Post* owner, a self-made working-class Brit, advises his new editor on possible articles— and the novel can be read as a tongue-in-cheek send-up of the whole James Bond school that still manages to deliver some genuine suspense. The hero is James Burlane, also known (for reasons series regulars will no doubt understand) as Major Khartoum. Prince Charles and Henry Kissinger make guest appearances. For some reason, all the characters seem to confuse British nobility with royalty.

*** Margaret Maron: *Shooting at Loons,* Mysterious, $18.95. The third novel about North Carolina Judge Deborah Knott is not quite up to the dazzling level of the first two, but it's well worth reading nonetheless. The mystery centers on the problems among fisherfolk, conservationists, and developers on the Crystal Coast. Deborah's relationship with Kidd Chapin, a game warden who hides under her borrowed house to ambush loon and swan poachers, is nicely done. (Question: How can a hand puppet give someone the finger?)

*** Harold Adams: *A Way With Widows,* Walker, $19.95. The latest about Carl Wilcox, itinerant signpainter-sleuth of the 1930s Dakotas, provides a neat, densely plotted, typically brief whodunit. Carl's sister Annabelle asks him to look into the murder of neighbor Aaron Feist, stabbed to death in the home of another neighbor, his widow (one of two Carl will bed in the course of his narrative) the prime suspect. I sometimes suspect Adams is letting latter-day slang creep into his dialogue, but otherwise his sense of period and people is flawless.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

With the recent rise in popularity of the historical mystery, more and more writers are jumping on the bandwagon. For Edward D. Hoch, however, historicals have always been an important part of his repertoire. The Ben Snow series began in 1961 in The Saint Mystery Magazine, *and continues to be one of the best series going if you're interested in nineteenth century American history. . . .*

HORSE THIEF HAVEN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was during December of 1892, as Ben Snow was heading south from Wyoming to the Arizona Territory, that somebody stole his horse. He'd spent most of the year working on the ranch of a Mormon family, trying to stay out of trouble for a change. Now he was pushing south again, planning to spend the winter in Arizona or even Mexico rather than risk a repeat of the snow that had swept down from the Rockies the previous year.

In the Utah town of Mexican Hat, not far from the Arizona border, Ben had tied Oats to a hitching post next to the Silver Dollar Cafe. It was early on a chilly evening, already dark on the shortest day of the year, and he was both hungry and thirsty. The cafe was hardly more than a makeshift bar with a Chinese cook at work in the back room, but that was about all he'd expected in a place called Mexican Hat. He finished the meal and beer, paid the surly bartender, and was about to depart when a tall, slender man wearing striped pants and a frock coat entered the cafe.

"A buckskinned Mexican kid just rode off on that sorrel horse tied outside. Wasn't yours, was it, stranger?"

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Ben was out of the cafe without a word, his hand already diving for his holster. Oats was gone, and in the darkness he could see no sign of a rider in any direction. He turned back to the door where the slender man stood lighting a little cigar. "Which way did he go?"

"Around the back. I didn't see him after that."

"You sure he was Mexican?"

The man shrugged. "Might have been Indian. He was wearin' fringed buckskin. I only got a glimpse of him as he jumped into the saddle." He held out his hand. "I'm Duke Perkins."

"Ben Snow." Ben was in no mood for pleasantries. Oats and the horse thief could be halfway to the Arizona Territory border. "Where can I get a horse?"

"We're too small to have a livery stable here in town. I got a few extra horses."

Ben was beginning to wonder about this man, so conveniently on the scene. "I'll bet you have one for sale."

"Could be. Want to have a look at them?"

For the moment Ben had no choice. He followed Duke Perkins around the back of the cafe and down a dusty alley between two wooden buildings. "They still hang horse thieves out here," he said, speaking to the slender man's back.

Duke Perkins paused and turned to him. "I know that, Mr. Snow."

Ben followed him into one of the buildings and saw that there were indeed a few horses inside. He almost expected to find Oats among them, but there was no sign of him. "How much for this one?" he asked, choosing the strongest-looking of them. "I only want the use of him until I recover my own horse."

"Don't matter. Same price—fifty dollars."

It was virtually everything Ben had saved during his months of ranch work, but he wasn't about to admit it. "I'm willing to pay more than that to someone who could help me recover Oats."

"Horse means that much to you?"

"Yes. We've been through a lot together." Ben turned away from him as he spoke.

"Make it a hundred and I'll see what I can do."

When Ben turned back he was holding his pistol aimed at the center of Duke Perkins's chest. "You're playing a dangerous game, Mr. Perkins. I want my horse back."

Duke Perkins made a gesture toward the gun under his coat but then thought better of it. "I don't have him! I swear to you!"

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"But you know who took him."

"No!"

"I'll give you ten seconds before I put a bullet through your kneecap."

Perkins remained silent while Ben began counting. When the count reached five he said, "His name is Manuel. That's all I know. He steals horses for a living."

"Where does he take them?" Ben asked, holding the gun steady.

"To Horse Thief Haven."

"Where?"

"It's a place near here, in one of the valleys. They buy stolen horses and ship them to Mexico."

"Mexico? What for?"

Duke Perkins shrugged. "Not my business. Put down the gun, will you? It makes me nervous."

"How do you get to this Horse Thief Haven place?" Ben lowered the weapon but kept it in his hand.

"Wait till morning and I'll take you there. I can't give directions."

"By morning you could be fifty miles away."

"Look, I'm not a thief. I'm the one who told you someone stole your horse, remember?"

"And tried to sell me another one."

Perkins started to turn away. "Suit yourself. Horse Thief Haven is half a day's ride from here. You'll never find it without me."

Ben thought about it. Shooting the man in the leg would keep him from sneaking off in the night, but it might also make it impossible for him to ride a horse the following day. He had no choice but to trust him. "I'll be here at seven o'clock," he said. "Ready to ride. Have a horse saddled for me."

"A hundred dollars?"

"Fifty for now. If I get Oats back we'll see about the rest."

Duke Perkins was waiting for him at the stroke of seven, and even had some hot coffee and scrambled eggs on a wood stove in one room of the stable. "You live here?" Ben asked, suddenly realizing that he was hungry.

"When I'm in Mexican Hat. Got a place in the Arizona Territory, but I do a lot of my business up here."

"Would that be horse business or monkey business?"

Perkins chuckled. "We understand each other, Mr. Snow. Maybe we're two of a kind. Ever do any gambling?"

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"No." Somehow Ben had figured him for a gambler.

"Finish your eggs and coffee, and we'll ride."

The horse Ben had chosen was no Oats, but he was strong and rode well. They headed south out of the sleepy town, crossing Monument Valley and Navajo country. Presently, when Ben felt they were well into the Arizona Territory, Duke Perkins turned east, heading into the Chuska Mountains. "It must be nearly noon," Ben observed, studying the sun low in the December sky. "How much longer?"

"It's not far now."

"Yesterday was the shortest day of the year."

Perkins turned, startled. "Who told you that?"

"It always comes a few days before Christmas."

"I don't think much about Christmas," he told Ben. "I had a wife once. It was a bigger thing then."

"What happened to her?"

"Went back East. Said the country was too wild for her. I suppose it is to some people, but I could never live anywhere else."

Ben had heard so many stories about outlaw towns hidden away in the mountains that he fully expected to encounter armed guards at any moment. When there were none he began to doubt Duke's story of Horse Thief Haven.

"There it is," Perkins said finally as the little settlement came into view. There were perhaps twenty cabins and small houses, but what dominated the village was the white church with its steeple reaching toward the sky. The only evidence of horses was in a paddock out behind the church. It seemed quite large, but at the moment Ben could see only one black horse inside. "Come on," Perkins said, spurring his horse forward. "You've got to meet Padre Tom."

The priest who went with the steepled church was a black-bearded man with flinty eyes and a smile that showed two gold teeth when it was wide enough. He came out to meet them, apparently having recognized Duke Perkins from a distance. "Good to see you again, Duke. Who's your companion?"

"Ben Snow, riding south from Wyoming. Got his horse stolen in Mexican Hat and I told him I'd help look for it."

The priest's eyes scanned Ben as he sat astride the horse. "You're new to these parts?"

"Just passing through. Soon as I find my horse I'll be on my way. He's a big sorrel, answers to the name of Oats."

"Haven't noticed any strange horses around," Padre Tom answered.

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"How about a buckskinned Mexican named Manuel?"

The priest's forehead knotted into a frown. "That would be Manuel Halcon. I haven't seen him lately."

"Not yesterday or today?"

"No, but I have been busy here with preparations for our Christmas Eve Mass. I hope you'll attend if you're still in town, Mr. Snow."

"Thank you, but I doubt if I'll be here that long." He glanced around him at the nearby cabins. Hardly anyone seemed to be out. "What's the name of this village, Padre?"

"Puerto Hostia—the Haven of the Host. That is our church as well."

"Hostia Haven," Ben murmured. "Horse Thief Haven."

"It has been called that, and worse," the bearded priest agreed with a smile. "That was its reputation from the old days."

"I think my horse was stolen by this Manuel Halcon."

"If he comes here, I will speak to him."

"Thank you, Padre."

Ben and Duke Perkins rode down the streets of the village, but no one came to greet them. "Things are quiet today," Perkins observed. "They don't like strangers. They may suspect you are some sort of law enforcer. And the men are all away."

"Then how do we find out if Manuel is in the village?"

"Rosa will tell me. She lives with him when he's here."

He pulled up before one of the cabins and they dismounted. "Isn't there a bar in this place?" Ben asked.

Perkins shook his head. "Padre Tom runs a tight ship."

"But you said stolen horses—"

Their conversation was cut short as the cabin door was opened by a pretty Mexican woman probably still in her twenties. "Ah, Duke, you have come back to see us! Come in!"

"Rosa, this is Ben Snow. We've ridden here from Mexican Hat looking for Manuel. Is he with you?"

She looked from one to the other. "No, he has not been here for a week. He promised he would return for Christmas."

"Then he will," Duke Perkins said with certainty. "Rosa, when he arrives, tell him I must see him at once. It's very important."

She nodded. "I will tell him."

They strolled on, leading their horses. "Is that his wife?" Ben asked.

"She uses his name sometimes, but no one believes they're really married. Manuel probably has a half-dozen Rosas in various towns. He travels often."

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"Does he do anything besides steal horses?" Ben wondered.

Duke shrugged. "He gambles, he carries messages into Mexico."

"What sort of messages?"

But Duke Perkins fell silent. Perhaps he feared he'd said too much already. Ben decided he could be just as silent, and no words were exchanged until they reached the edge of the village. Then Perkins said, "You may have to wait here till Christmas if you want your horse back."

"Where can I stay?" It was, after all, only three days away.

"Some of these cabins are empty. They're used by people in the Mexican trade."

"What Mexican trade?"

"I told you about the horses."

"I see no horses here. The corral behind the church has only one."

"You will hear them when they come," he said. "Here—this is a place we can stay."

The cabin looked just like the others, but Perkins seemed to know it was unlocked and available to them. Inside they found bunk beds and a larder stocked with enough food for several days.

Ben sat down on the bed. It seemed comfortable enough. "What do we do? Just sit here and wait?"

"I will ride out to some nearby places to look for Manuel. It's better if I go alone."

"And never come back?"

Perkins shook his head. "I was there this morning, wasn't I? If you wish, you can go up to the church and help Padre Tom with his Christmas Eve preparations."

Duke Perkins rode off soon afterward, and Ben decided to follow his suggestion and return to the church. Perhaps he could learn more from the priest about this strange community. When he reached the church he found that several others were already there, working on a life-size crèche at the side of the church.

"It is to be a real Christmas here," Padre Tom told Ben as he rode up. "We need all the help we can get. If you could give us a hand with the straw on the roof here, Mr. Snow—"

"Ben."

"—Ben, it would be a big help."

He spent the next half-hour arranging the straw roof and the crib where a doll representing the Christ child would rest. "We have no babies here to play the part," the bearded priest explained. "But Rosa Halcon will be our Virgin Mary."

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Ben had not noticed her presence before that, but she was working with some other women on costumes for the Christmas scene. "A good choice," Ben told Padre Tom. If not the most virginal of the women, she was certainly the most attractive.

"We need a St. Joseph too, if you'd be interested, Ben."

"That's a little out of my line, Padre, but thanks anyway."

"We're having shepherds and wise men too. The wise men should arrive on camels, I know, but we'll have to settle for horses."

"I heard tell of somebody importing camels over toward Death Valley."

The priest smiled. "Horses will do just fine. If you won't be St. Joseph, I hope you'll come and join us anyway. It'll be Christmas Eve, before the midnight Mass."

Later that afternoon, as Ben was about to return to the cabin, a lone horseman appeared at the church to see Padre Tom. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and crossed gunbelts in the manner of Mexican bandits. Ben wondered what business he had with the priest. The two of them sat close together in the chilly twilight and talked for nearly an hour. Then they shook hands and the rider mounted up. Ben watched until he was out of the village, heading south.

Rosa came up to him as the people were going home for supper. "Will you be eating with Duke?"

"He rode away and hasn't come back yet."

"Then come to my house. I am alone too, until Manuel returns."

Ben was grateful for the hospitality, and tried not to think of the irony of dining with Manuel's woman when he might be forced to kill the man within the next few days.

The food that Rosa served was good and well prepared. He complimented her on it, telling her the village could use a small cafe. "It would be a good business for you," he suggested.

She shrugged. "We are only here for a short time. Manuel will be moving on soon. We might go to Mexico."

"That man who was at the church this afternoon—he was a Mexican, wasn't he?"

She nodded. "He comes here often to see Padre Tom."

"What about?"

She looked away. "I do not know."

"There were only women at the church this afternoon, helping Padre Tom. Where are all the men?"

"They are away working," she answered vaguely. "Everyone will be home for Christmas."

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"I'd like to be gone by then, if I get my horse back."

She gazed at Ben with questioning eyes, trying to comprehend. "The beast means that much to you?"

"Yes. He couldn't be replaced."

"Almost like a child. I lost one once, a few years back—a baby girl only a few days old."

"I'm sorry."

"Manuel was good about it. Very tender and loving. But he couldn't make up for the loss."

"Is he a good man?" Ben asked.

"The best I've ever known, when he isn't away gambling."

When Ben left her house a little later he walked through the silent streets to the cabin he was sharing with Perkins. The village was strange, even more so at night when there were no lights from bars or cafes to lend a bit of normalcy to the place. No men, no babies—only Padre Tom and the women. It was like an Indian village while the war parties were away, only there at least one had the sound of children.

As he entered the darkened cabin, the only sound was the humming of flies. There were a few outside but not that many, and he wondered what was attracting them in the darkness. He felt his way to an oil lamp on the table and lit it. Then he saw the bloody body in the top bunk. It was dressed in buckskin, and he had no doubt it was the body of Manuel Halcon. He touched the icy flesh and dried blood with his fingertips and then pulled away. Somehow, the horse thief had been punished for his crime.

Ben rode back up to Padre Tom's church because there seemed no one else to tell. "I think it's Manuel," he said, "but I've never met the man. His throat's been cut."

"I will come," the priest said. "I may still be able to administer the last rites." He reached for his poncho.

"If it is Manuel, someone will have to tell Rosa." It was a job Ben didn't want any part of.

"I will tell her," Padre Tom said. They left the church and hurried down into the village, the priest leading the way through the darkness. Occasionally a cabin window showed a light, but most were as black as the sky above their heads.

"It's a dark night without stars," Ben observed.

"There were clouds moving in at sundown. The chill air could even bring snow. We get it occasionally here."

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When they reached the cabin the priest entered first and made the sign of the cross over the body. "That is Manuel Halcon," he confirmed. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Are there any other men here?"

"Not at the moment."

"Indians?"

"We have good relations with the Navajo." He said a few words in Latin over the body, then went off to break the news to Rosa and comfort her the best he could. He promised to return with a wagon later so the body could be removed for burial.

Ben heard the wagon about an hour later, but Padre Tom was not alone. Rosa had insisted on coming along, to see Manuel one last time. She cried out at the sight of him, and would have thrown herself on the bloody body had not Padre Tom held her back. "Your grief is understandable, my child, but you must remember him as he was. You must pray for him."

"He had no enemies," she said tearfully. "Who would do such a thing?"

Ben couldn't say the words in his mind. He had one enemy—me—and I would have killed him. Ben couldn't say that because he wasn't even sure it was true anymore.

After he and Padre Tom had carried the body out to the buckboard, wrapped in a blanket, Ben asked, "Who was your Mexican visitor today?"

The priest smiled. "The man with the gunbelts? Sancho Valdez. He's a minor politician in one of the border towns. Sometimes he comes for a visit. I tell him the Indians are peaceful here, but he always travels heavily armed."

Ben dropped the subject, but it seemed odd that so fearful a man would make such a long journey alone. The padre promised that the body would be kept in the church overnight and given a Christian burial the following day. Ben offered to help dig the grave. The priest and Rosa seemed grateful. He hoped Duke Perkins would be back by that time too.

That night in the cabin he lay awake, imagining blood dripping from the bunk above, even though the bedding had all been dry. For hours he listened hard for the sound of horses, but heard nothing.

The following day was Friday, the twenty-third of December. Ben Snow awoke from a brief and troubled sleep to find the sun still shrouded by clouds and someone at the cabin door. His gunbelt

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was hanging next to the bunk. He'd pulled his pistol free before he recognized Duke Perkins.

"You took a long time getting back."

"There was some trouble up the valley. A bit of gunplay with renegade Indians. It's all right now. I helped out the local men."

"Manuel Halcon is dead."

Perkins nodded. "I saw him in his coffin while Padre Tom was saying mass just now. I dropped off some horses for his wise men."

"What's going on here, Duke?"

He squinted at Ben. "What do you mean?"

"A Mexican named Valdez came to visit the priest yesterday. You talk of horse thieves and messages across the border—"

"It's Padre Tom's concern, not yours. The less you know, the better."

When Ben went up to the church again, somehow he was not surprised to see that Sancho Valdez had returned. He had not ridden far south when he departed the previous day. Perhaps he had not left the village at all.

Padre Tom was quick to introduce them. "Sancho, this is Ben Snow. He is visiting here until Christmas."

The Mexican eyed him uncertainly, fingering the gunbelts across his chest. When he shook hands he said, "I heard of a gunfighter of that name some years back. They said he was as fast as Billy the Kid."

"Interesting," Ben said. "I've never run into him."

Valdez was preparing to depart again. "If you are ever south of the border," he told Ben, "I might have work for you."

"I'll keep it in mind."

When they were alone Padre Tom smiled at Ben. "Have you changed your mind about playing St. Joseph?"

"No. I came to help you dig that grave."

The smile vanished. "Of course, and we should get at it. The odor is becoming quite noticeable."

The body had been left in a plain pine coffin in the church, at the foot of the altar. They carried it out to the little graveyard beyond the horse corral, where Ben saw that the three wise men's saddled horses had joined the padre's own steed. "Do you ride much?" Ben asked the priest.

"As little as possible. I usually hook him up to the wagon if I'm going into town for supplies."

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The ground in the graveyard was firm but not hard, and it took them less than a half-hour to dig a proper grave. Rosa had seen them digging and come up for the burial, but she stood some distance away until they'd finished. When they were lowering the coffin into the grave she came over and knelt on the ground in prayer. Padre Tom said some prayers and then it was over.

As they went back inside the church to the bearded priest's living quarters a thought occurred to Ben. "Where will you get the wise men? You're looking for a St. Joseph but you need three others for the wise men, not even counting the shepherds."

"The men of the village will be back tomorrow," the priest assured him.

"They're horse thieves, aren't they?"

Padre Tom chuckled. "No, no, no! The name Horse Thief Haven dates back fifty years. Nothing like that goes on today."

He knew the priest was lying, because there was no other explanation. Manuel had been killed to satisfy Ben, so he'd leave the rest of them alone. And perhaps he would, once he had Oats back.

After Rosa departed he helped fill in the grave. Then he went back to the cabin where Duke Perkins was dozing in Ben's bunk. He woke up as soon as Ben entered and slid out. "Hope you don't mind me taking your bed. I didn't want to sleep where the body had been."

"Stay here tonight. I don't mind sleeping up above if the bedding is clean."

"Did you bury Manuel?"

Ben nodded. "Put him in the ground. It's the best place for a horse thief."

"Any idea who killed him?"

"Whoever it was wanted to make sure I knew about it. They want me out of here, Duke, and that makes me want to stay all the more." But even as he said the words, he realized the flaw in his reasoning. If getting rid of him was the motive for killing Manuel, wouldn't it have been easier and more logical to simply kill him instead of Manuel?

Duke Perkins had not yet paid his respects to Rosa, so late in the afternoon they went over to her cabin. She seemed pleased to have company, and invited them to stay for a light supper. "You just fed me last night!" Ben protested.

"It was good, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

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"Then sit down, both of you! I will fix you something spicy and Mexican tonight."

The supper was accompanied by a bottle of red wine. To Ben, it was almost as if she was celebrating Manuel's death. Perhaps Mexicans held something like an Irish wake. By the time he and Perkins returned to the cabin, it was going on ten o'clock. They talked for a bit and then went to bed.

It was much later, sometime toward dawn, when Ben was awakened by a sound like thunder that seemed to sweep down from the hills. It was too soon for the traditional reindeer of Santa Claus, but just the right time, apparently, for the scores of riderless horses that galloped through the streets and finally headed up the hill in the half-light toward the big corral behind the church of Padre Tom.

Ben watched through the window from his upper bunk, then jumped to the floor and shouted at Duke Perkins. "What in hell is going on here?"

"Calm down, will you?" the slender man said. "It's not even daylight yet." He buried his face in the pillow.

"Padre Tom told me there were no horse thieves here. Then who are those men driving the horses up to his corral?"

"The horses aren't stolen, they're wild. They live in the canyons, and they belong as much to us as to the Navajo."

"What's Padre Tom doing with them?"

"You'd better ask him that."

"Damn right, I'll ask him!" Ben dressed quickly and strapped on his gun belt.

"Don't do anything rash, Ben. Padre Tom is a good man. They are all good men."

"What about the Mexican, Valdez?"

"Even he."

Ben ran out of the cabin, heading for the church. Now, by the first light of the new day, he could see the cowboys tying their horses outside and removing their hats as they entered for the morning Mass. Many of them were Mexicans. Ben walked in behind them and knelt in a pew. For a moment the solemnity of the Mass drained the anger from him. He'd been irrational, he knew, ever since Oats had been stolen, wanting only vengeance on the thief. Now that Manuel was beyond his vengeance, he was lashing out at other targets, fearful that he would never see the great sorrel stallion again.

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He left the church before the Mass was ended and went back to inspect the horses in the corral. There were close to a hundred of them, driven down here by a dozen riders. Only two in the whole corral looked like Oats, and they had a wild, untamed quality completely foreign to him.

Outside the church, Sancho Valdez was personally greeting each man. Ben had a feeling the horses would be gone by nightfall, sold to this Mexican by Padre Tom. He went around the back of the building and used the door to the priest's living quarters.

Padre Tom was there, just removing his vestments. "Ben, it's good to see you. I feared you might be on your way before this."

"Not without my horse."

Padre Tom motioned toward the window. "He's not out there, if that's what you think."

"I know. I've looked. What kind of a crazy scheme is this, selling stolen horses in Mexico?"

"I knew you didn't understand. Sit down here, Ben, where we can talk. Later, with the Christmas Eve ceremony, there'll be no time. Have you ever heard of a man named Porfirio Diaz?"

"I pay little attention to Mexican politics. He's the president down there, isn't he?"

"Dictator is a better name for him. He and his aides have ruled the country with an iron fist since eighteen seventy-seven. He has brought some progress, but only with the financing and management of foreigners. The communal lands of the Indians have been given to the wealthy owners of large estates, and Indians who revolt are sold into slavery. Unfortunately, he is supported by some elements of the Church there. Relief, if it is to come, must be from the outside."

"The horses?"

He nodded. "The horses. A revolution needs many things that I cannot give. I cannot arm the people, or supply mercenaries to fight their battles. But no revolution in a country like Mexico can succeed without horses. There are hundreds of wild horses in the valleys near here, belonging to no one. Sancho Valdez sent a dozen of his men here to help round them up."

"Valdez is one of the revolution's leaders?"

The priest nodded. "And I support him. He may not win, but others will rise in his place. If it takes ten years, twenty years, the Mexican people will triumph. Diaz will be overthrown."

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Ben thought about that. "And Manuel Halcon was one of Valdez's men?"

"Of course."

"But he didn't just round up wild horses. He stole them too, and brought them here."

Padre Tom sighed. "I can't believe that. He was a good man. Rosa will tell you that. If he took your horse, there was a vital reason for it. Perhaps he would have returned it if he hadn't died."

"You find the best in everyone," Ben commented, "even when it's not there."

"I tell you this, Ben. If Sancho found one of his men stealing horses, he would execute him on the spot."

"Maybe that's exactly what he did."

The dozen Mexicans who would accompany the horses south were spending Christmas Eve with their women. All would be at Padre Tom's midnight Mass before starting out on Christmas morning. Three of them had been enlisted as wise men and would arrive on the chestnut, black, and brown-and-white horses Perkins had provided.

Watching the men familiarize themselves with their mounts, Ben asked Duke why he had gone to the trouble. "You've got almost a hundred mounts here for the night already."

"Only horses, not mounts. These are too wild to be ridden without being broken. That'll be done back in Mexico. If I hadn't brought these, the wise men would be walking tonight."

Padre Tom had finally induced Sancho Valdez to play St. Joseph in the little tableau. The Mexican leader seemed honored by the choice. Ben helped him with the robe he would wear and tried to decide why he'd been so reluctant to undertake the simple chore. Was it because the robe would have made it difficult to reach his gun if he'd worn it underneath? Did he still feel a danger here, at Padre Tom's little church on Christmas Eve?

The tableau went off without a hitch, with Rosa cradling the doll representing the Christ child and Joseph welcoming the shepherds who came to worship. One of the other village women played an angel, and the mounted wise men arrived on schedule with their gifts. It was shortly before midnight when the few dozen people entered the church for the Mass.

In his sermon, Padre Tom began by wishing everyone a Merry Christmas in both Spanish and English. Then he continued, "We

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have much to be thankful for this holy night, with ninety-five horses in the corral, rounded up without incident or injury. The sad death of our brother Manuel is another matter, which I pray will soon be put to rest. Manuel Halcon had his faults, surely, but what man does not? He gambled too much and drank more than moderation allowed, but to my knowledge he never stole or was unfaithful to his dear Rosa. He is someone for us to mourn and remember on this Christmas Day."

He went on about the true meaning of Christmas, and about how the poor and downtrodden of Mexico were suffering much as the early Christians had suffered. The sermon was, to Ben's ears, an outcry of both compassion and revolution. He wondered how it sounded to the others in the congregation.

As for Manuel, how could a horse thief be a man who never stole? How could—?

Ben rose suddenly and walked out of the church as the sermon came to an end. He went out to where the three horses of the wise men stood tethered and waiting. Then he called out sharply, *"Oats!"*

The brown-and-white horse reared up and gave a familiar whinny. Ben ran to him and stroked his sides. How could he not have known at once? He ran his hand over the white markings and saw that they were merely some sort of paint.

"They shoot horse thieves, you know," a voice behind him said, "when there's no rope handy to hang 'em."

Ben turned and stared into Duke Perkins's eyes. He had his pistol out, aimed at Ben's chest. "Haven't we played this scene before?"

"Last time the gun was in your hand, Ben."

"You killed Manuel, didn't you? You killed him and you stole my horse."

"Figured it all out, haven't you?"

"I think so," Ben told him, careful to avoid any sudden moves. "What did you fight about back there in Mexican Hat? Gambling, I suppose, since you were both into it. That's when you killed him, cutting his throat in the dark street outside the Silver Dollar Cafe. You stole my horse not for its use as a mode of transportation but simply as a beast of burden, to carry away the body of your victim. I suppose if he was found dead in Mexican Hat, you knew suspicion would point to you. You hid the body and the horse in your stable. You couldn't simply return Oats because there'd be a great deal of blood on him and the saddle. So you brought me down here and then went off, pretending to help with the horse roundup but actually

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returning to Mexican Hat for Oats and Manuel's body. You used white paint to disguise my horse, and brought him with two others for Padre Tom. Manuel's body got dumped on our bunk, probably so I'd be suspected of the killing."

"You're guessing! How would you know all that?"

"You said there was trouble, gunplay with the Indians, during the roundup, but Padre Tom just confirmed there was no incident or injury. I remembered that and got to wondering where you were if it wasn't with the Mexicans. I didn't have to wonder very long. You came back with three saddled horses, ready to ride. Not wild, obviously. They'd come from your own stable back in Mexican Hat. I wondered what else you'd brought back, and then I knew. You'd mentioned not wanting to sleep in the bunk where Manuel's body had been, but I hadn't told you that. And you didn't speak with Padre Tom about it, because he was saying Mass when you dropped off the horses. I should have known immediately that Manuel had been dead for many hours. The body was attracting flies, and it was icy to the touch. The blood had already dried, the bedding was unmarked. When we carried it out, the body wasn't noticeably stiff. That meant the after-death rigor was already wearing off, as it does after about twenty-four hours. Manuel had died the night before I found him."

"You've had some experience with bodies."

"Enough."

Ben could see Perkins listening to the hymn from church. They'd be coming out soon. "Our talk is over." He raised the pistol an inch and his eyes hardened.

"At least let me draw against you. Give me a chance."

Duke Perkins snorted. "If you think you can draw and fire before I squeeze this trigger, go ahead and try!"

Ben Snow had never before robbed a dead man, but he did take back the fifty dollars he'd given Perkins for the horse.

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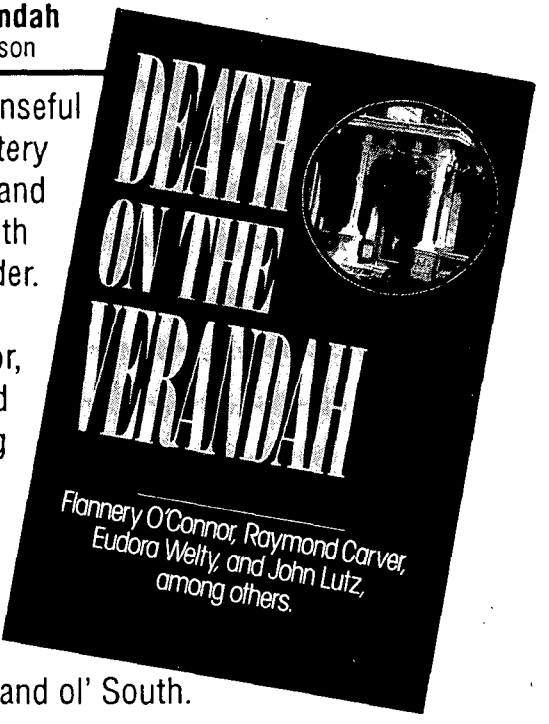

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THE SOUND OF SILENCE

by CELIA FREMLIN

"A twenty percent chance of a complete cure," the surgeon had explained to her, tapping out the message on the cunning little machine he used for his profoundly deaf patients. "So it's up to you, Mrs. Pearce. Shall we go ahead? Or—" here his kind grey eyes scanned her with what looked like a hint of pity—"Or would you like to think about it, and let us know in the next day or two?"

Did she want to think about it? Or did she want to shout "Yes!" and Yes again, to this one last chance of getting her hearing back? For the risk involved in the operation was not the risk of death—this Margery Pearce would have faced without hesitation. No, it was a risk of losing, forever, that last little thread of hearing she still had. By leaning out of the front window of her fourth-floor flat on summer evenings she could still just hear—but only just—the very noisiest of the motorbikes revving up at the hands of the very most inconsiderate of the Estate's teenagers. If she had the operation, and if it failed, then even this last thread of contact with the outside world would be gone. Only now, under the threat of losing it, did she realise how precious to her was this "motorbike nuisance," about which the other residents of her block complained so bitterly.

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What else did she stand to lose? The more she thought about it, the more Margery realised how very much there was still to be lost, once you really faced the prospect of losing it. There was her friend Reenie, for instance, from a few doors along on the same floor: Reenie, who still took the trouble to scream oddments of gossip into Margery's right ear, raising her voice to its topmost decibels. And another device, too, had been contrived, which the more patient of her neighbours were intermittently willing to use. She kept a special tape recorder in her living room which she switched on as soon as anyone called to see her. Leaning close, they could talk into it with their message or bit of news, so that later, when they had gone (not before, because to normal ears the sound would have been intolerable) Margery could turn it up to full blast, and then, leaning her head right against the machine, the bones of her skull pressed close to feel the vibrations, she could, more often than not, make out what they had been saying. To Margery, this device had become a lifeline, though of course to the visitors it was an appalling nuisance. They did their best not to show it, naturally, for they had been very fond of Margery once. In the old days, before this calamity struck her, she had been great fun, a delightful friend and companion.

Five years ago was when it had begun, shortly after she had accepted early retirement from her job at the Council offices. She had been planning happily for the extended years of leisure that seemed to lie ahead. Some modest travel, perhaps? Trips to interesting places? And lots and lots of time, of course, for talking and laughing with friends.

When had she first realised it was not going to be like that? At the beginning, the changes had been so slight that it had been possible to ignore them. Missing the odd remark here and there in a conversation?—it could happen to anyone. Most people, too, have had the experience of joining in a general laugh without having taken in what the laughter is all about—it's a common enough social predicament and nothing to worry about; so she'd assured herself.

But the time came when she was forced to notice these things; to notice, too, that the taps made disconcertingly little sound when she turned them on, the water streaming down so softly, yet so profusely, into the sink. Sometimes, in a sort of panic, she would turn them on to their very fullest extent, the water spurting up almost into her face, just for the sake of hearing a proper surge of sound. She began to notice, too, that the saucepans no longer made a proper clatter on the draining board as she upended them; and she found

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herself, almost unconsciously, slamming them down as hard as she could in order to create a satisfying clang of sound, for all the world as if her ears were as good as ever.

They weren't, though. Soon, she could no longer hear if the kettle was boiling, she had to watch for the steam. Shopping, too, was becoming an ordeal as the checkout girls began to mouth silently the sum required of her, and all she could do was hand over a bank note and hope for the best.

Inevitably, the time came when she could no longer hide her disability; the time when "Sorry, I must have been dreaming!" would no longer do; when she had given once too often that vague, meaningless little laugh in response to a remark that she couldn't hear. Everyone would have to know. Probably they *had* known, already, for some time, but hadn't liked to say so. In a way, this was almost the most painful part of the whole tragedy, this "coming out" as a deaf person, of watching one's relationships slowly, inexorably deteriorating until there was nothing left but pity.

Except, perhaps, from Reenie, her closest friend of all, who still screamed into her ear and bellowed into the tape recorder more days than not, creating a mouselike thread of a whisper which Margery could just manage to interpret.

If she had the operation, even this might be lost forever. But, on the other hand . . .

"Thank you," she said to her surgeon, "but I don't need to think about it, I want you to go ahead with the operation." She paused, and then added: "Shall I know as soon as I wake up from the anaesthetic whether it's worked?"

He hesitated for only a moment. She fancied she saw once again a spark of pity in the attentive grey eyes as he conveyed his answer:

"Yes, Mrs. Pearce. You will know as soon as you wake up."

Never can the sound of a hospital tea trolley rattling across a ward have inspired such total, indescribable joy in a human soul as did this one in the soul of Margery Pearce as she came round from the anesthetic.

It had worked! The small twenty-percent chance had worked, and she could *hear!* She could hear everything, the voices of the nurses, the chatter of her fellow patients—*everything!* The miracle had come true, and in discharging her some days later, Mr. Wilmot, her surgeon, seemed almost as delighted as she was herself, surprised, though, to learn that she had no friend or relative coming to fetch

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her from the hospital. She had to explain that she'd told no one at all—not even Reenie—about the operation. She'd felt that she just couldn't face the possibility—indeed, the probability—of coming home and having to tell them that it hadn't worked after all. To wipe the congratulatory smiles off their faces and watch the pity creeping back. . . .

So she'd told them instead that she was spending a week or two with a niece at Bexhill . . . and no, she wasn't quite sure when she'd be returning.

An innocent enough white lie—but a pity, in a way, as things had turned out. Had she told the truth, she could now be returning home in triumph, to surprise them all, to delight them all. What a welcome she would be receiving! She would be like a queen, showered with applause and congratulations wherever she went—in the lifts, on the stone stairs, back and forth across the balconies.

But somehow, even now, she didn't want to tell them. Not just yet. It was too soon. Just for this evening, this very first evening, she wanted to be alone, all alone with the magical medley of sounds that floated in from every direction, sounds that she had never thought to hear again. She needed, for a little while, to be alone with her relief and joy; to revel, by herself, in the tap-tap of feet along the corridors . . . of children shouting . . . of mothers scolding . . . of doors slamming, of voices raised in laughter and in argument. It was like waking up in heaven, and she needed to be alone for a while to get her bearings in this brand-new paradise.

So as yet she had told no one she was back. She had arrived back inconspicuously in a taxi, just as dusk was falling, and was now roaming, half-bemused, around her small, familiar flat, alive now with long-forgotten sounds. The muttering of pipes in the wall when someone ran a bath upstairs. The hiss of the kettle when it boiled—so loud now to her unaccustomed ears, it was like traffic surging through her kitchen. And then there was the sound like a cascading waterfall when she turned a tap on; why, she could even hear her own footsteps on the fitted carpet in the living room! How she stamped and scuffed her feet across it, just for the joy of hearing them!

Amazing! Incredible! And here, on its accustomed shelf, stood her tape recorder, patiently waiting for the bellowed messages and shouted bits of news that would never be needed again.

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But of course, nobody knew this yet, not even Reenie. It occurred to her that Reenie, who had a key, might already have left a welcome-home message for her. Impelled by a mild curiosity, she switched it on to see.

Nothing. Not a sound. For just one second, she was thrown into complete and total panic, fancying that her deafness had suddenly returned, and she was hearing once again the terrible sound of silence. Oughtn't the tape to be making some sort of faint buzzing sound as it revolved? Why wasn't she hearing it?

But it was all right. It must be that the tape did indeed revolve silently, because she realised now, as her panic subsided, that she could still hear all the other wonderful sounds. Why, she could even hear the clock ticking from right across the room; her handsome, eight-day clock in its ornate gilt frame. Had she really only been away for eight days? Or maybe Reenie had come in and wound it for her?

Anyway, there it was, ticking its wonderful loud tick. Of course, she couldn't hear the ticking anymore from her adjoining bedroom with the door closed, but she could hear the chime. Lying on her bed, in a state near to ecstasy, she listened to the sweet musical notes, and they were like the bells of heaven. Eight o'clock. She allowed happiness to roll over her in great warm waves.

It could have been barely an hour later when she woke; very suddenly, and with the unmistakable sense of having been woken by something.

By what? In those first bemused seconds of waking, she had quite forgotten that her hearing had come back, and she imagined that someone had shaken her awake.

Then, all in a rush, the glorious truth dawned on her. It was a *noise* that had woken her! She had *heard* it! For a little while she lay revelling in this fact, and only gradually did she get around to wondering what, actually, was causing the noise? A sort of thumping sound it was, and it was coming through the wall from the sitting room. An intermittent clinking, too, and a sort of scraping, a sort of rustling. And—yes—voices. Male voices, by the sound of it.

By the sound of it! How wonderful to be able to *hear* all this, right through the wall! So wonderful indeed, that even after it dawned on her that she was being burgled—that two or more of the young delinquents who were all too active on this Estate were helping themselves to her belongings—even now, she found it almost impos-

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sible to care. Compared with the joy of being able to *hear* movements and voices on the other side of the wall, the prospect of merely losing everything she possessed was as nothing.

She was curious though, and felt she had a sort of duty to do *something*. Slipping off the bed, she tiptoed to the wall adjoining the sitting room and pressed her ear right up against it.

At once she could hear the voices clearly:

"C'mon," said one. "Just tip 'em all out, we ha'nt got all night. The old bat's deaf as a dead 'un, she won't hear a bloody thing."

A noisy clattering of the upended canteen of cutlery followed. Then, a second voice: "We still got time to do ole Timmins, as well as the old bag in four forty-two . . ."

Four forty-two! That was Reenie's flat! Now, at last, Margery began to feel an appropriate degree of concern and a degree of panic. I must *do* something, she thought: but what? She dared not pick up the phone, the thieves would surely hear her and would burst through the door to snatch it from her hand and perhaps beat her up—undoing, possibly, the magical cure effected by this delicate operation from which she was still convalescent.

Unthinkable. That was a risk she would not, could not take.

So she did absolutely nothing. Just sat there in the dark until she heard the front door of her flat opening and closing, indicating that the thieves had left, and were on their way down the flights of stairs.

What a lucky thing that she had switched the tape recorder on when she got home and had forgotten to switch it off again! In something like half a minute she had it out on the balcony, turned up to that overwhelming pitch that had been her lifeline during the months and years of deafness.

In a way, it was being her lifeline again.

"C'mon, just tip 'em all out!" it bellowed into the night sky above the blocks of flats, "the old bat's deaf as a dead 'un, she won't hear a bloody thing. . . " And then, ". . . got time to do ole Timmins, as well as the old bag in four forty-two. . . "

Margery, leaning over her balcony, watched with satisfaction as the two dim, gangling figures, dropping their loot as they went, raced across the space between the blocks as if devils were after them.

Well, not exactly devils. Rather the reverse, according to the local paper, which picked up the story.

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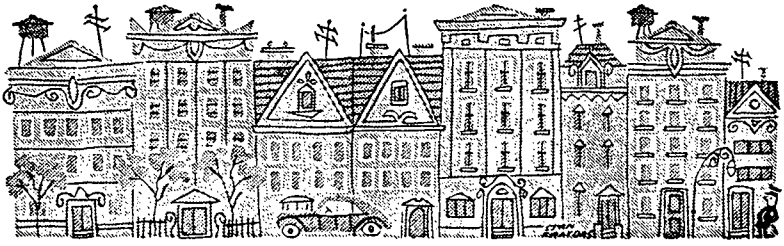
"Apparently they thought it was the voice of God, yelling at them out of the sky," Reenie giggled, reading out bits of the report to Margery and a couple of other friends who had gathered for a good gossip in Margery's living room. "They were terrified," Reenie continued. "I suppose they saw it as a warning that *He* had been watching everything they'd been up to! Let's hope it's taught them a lesson!" And then, turning to Margery: "It looks, Marge, as if you've done more to turn them into God-fearing citizens than all those years of religious education at school!"

Everyone laughed good-humouredly, including Margery.

How wonderful it was to be able to join in casual laughter without pretence, having actually heard the joke.



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FLOWERS FOR JENNIFER

by CHRISTINE MATTHEWS AND ROBERT J. RANDISI

Luther Gordon bowed his head to smell the tulips gripped tightly in his hands. There were a dozen, a rainbow assortment. He knew Jennifer liked tulips. He knew a lot about Jennifer. After all, when you loved someone the way he loved her, you learned as much as you could. You listened and remembered.

It had been ten years since Luther first saw Jennifer. She was in her twenties then, a fresh-faced, slender redhead with clear blue eyes. And he remembered wondering what she saw in him.

He had just turned forty-five, was short and slight, his hair thinning on top. Still, that hadn't mattered to Jennifer. She seemed to accept him for what he was, never demanding more. Her smile, the unique way she communicated, told him how very much she loved him. They'd always had a special bond, a silent language no one else understood. She was so wonderful then. Who could blame him for wanting her so?

He checked his watch. With an affectionate smile he remembered how often she ran late for appointments. As he stood across the street from her apartment building, waiting for her to come outside, he hoped she hadn't forgotten their date. But he knew full well that if she had, he'd forgive her. He always forgave her tantrums and pettiness. The flowers were proof of his devotion and patience. He'd wait forever for the chance to give them to her.

The doorman held open the apartment door and suddenly, there she was. Now in her thirties, she wore her red hair shorter, more stylish, but her body was still as slender and her face—dominated by those sapphire eyes—as fresh and beautiful as ever. A lump formed in his throat as he realized they had not seen each other for a year. He remembered the last time he touched her soft, soft skin. Had she missed him? Ached for his touch?

She had. He was certain she had. He felt her desire yanking at his gut. It drew him closer. They had always been so in tune.

Words stuck in his throat. He tried calling to her but traffic drowned out his attempts. He timidly waved. She was looking down, hurrying to work, and didn't see him.

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Stepping off the curb, he crossed the street diagonally, so he would intersect her path. Once again, he opened his mouth to say her name. He had said it aloud many times over the course of the past year, but this would be the first time she would hear him. Hear and understand he still adored her.

"Jennifer . . ."

She turned, her eyes widened in surprise. He could see she recognized him—he hadn't changed that much.

"These are for you."

He stretched his arm out with a wan smile. The tulips bobbed in the wind as he offered them to her. The surprise faded and he knew she'd give him one of those looks. "Tulips are your favorite. I remembered."

"But. I thought you were . . ."

"I'm sorry I had to go away. There just wasn't time to say goodbye. But I won't ever leave you again.

"Here." He grabbed her left hand, pried open the fingers, and squeezed them around the dripping stems. Wanting only for her to accept his token of love. Wanting her to know he was back and nothing could keep them apart.

He watched as she put her right hand into her purse. She fumbled and he laughed.

"You always were losing your keys, could never find your comb. Remember the afternoon you went shopping with your sister and couldn't find your wallet?"

"How do you know about that?"

She shook her head slightly, he knew she was telling him how much she appreciated his attention to all the details making up her life, her days.

"I saw you change purses that morning. Through the window. You left the wallet on your dresser. I came after you, thought you might need some money."

"Here it is," she spoke mostly to herself.

She had a small gift for him. She'd been expecting him after all. And they told him in prison not to go near her when he got out. Fools. No one knew what he and Jennifer meant to each other. No one else could understand their special kind of love.

Then she was flinging the tulips at him. It happened so fast that Luther did not even see the gun. Jennifer's hand came out of her purse; she pointed and fired.

ONCE.

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"I can't take this anymore!" she screamed. "Who the hell gave you the right?"

TWICE.

"I never did anything to you. You don't even know me! Leave me alone!"

THREE TIMES.

Luther Gordon staggered back as each bullet struck him in the chest.

Jennifer moved forward, smashing a yellow tulip under her foot.

"You've ruined my life!" and fired AGAIN . . . and AGAIN . . . and AGAIN . . . "I hate you!"

"This guy's still alive . . ." Luther heard from far away.

"Not for long," someone else said.

What were they talking about? Of course he was still alive.

"She hit him all six times, and he's still breathing. He's one stubborn bastard."

"He can be as stubborn as he wants," the second voice said, "he ain't gonna make it to the hospital. Hold that IV still. Jesus, slow down, Harry! He ain't gonna make it anyway!"

"Too bad. Hope that crazy broad gets what's comin' to her. A witness said the poor sap was just trying to give her some flowers."

"Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"It was in all the papers. This is that Gordon guy. He went to jail last year under the new stalking law. Just got out last week."

"Stalking?"

"Sure," the second voice explained. "He stalked that girl for years, dogged her tracks, showed up at her job and home. It wasn't until the law was passed that they finally put him away. Poor girl must have been scared stiff. She probably bought a gun and when he went after her today, she freaked out and shot him."

"Jeez, can't blame her for that. This town's crawlin' with losers. Hey, Harry, let's stop for coffee. The stiff'll never know."

The pink tulip fell from Luther's fist as his hand went limp.

AUTHORS' NOTE: Approximately one in every twenty people will become a stalker's victim. (Stalker Victim's Network)

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It all began with a mystery novel contest sponsored by McClure's *magazine in 1928 when two cousins, Frederic Dannay and Manfred Lee, entered and won under the pseudonym Ellery Queen. Pseudonyms were required for the contest, to insure impartiality, but the precaution was probably unnecessary in the case of Dannay and Lee, since this was their first novel. No sooner had their book,* The Roman Hat Mystery, *been awarded the prize than* McClure's *went bankrupt and the duo were without a publisher. Happily, the Frederick A. Stokes Company stepped in and brought out the novel in 1929, just sixty-five years ago. We celebrate this seminal event in the history of American crime fiction by reprinting one of Queen's superbly clued short stories—one we're told the authors themselves particularly liked. It is not, of course, only the fiction of the two cousins that will be remembered, though during the years when they were writing most, total sales of their books reached a reported 120 million. Their other great achievement was the founding of our own magazine in 1941. From a distance of fifty-three years, this very successful undertaking may not seem as significant as it was; we need to recall that at the time there was virtually no forum for publication of American short crime fiction, and Dannay in particular, who took over the editing of the magazine, had an enormous influence not only on authors working in the field but on the public's perception of the crime story. . . .*

THE PRESIDENT'S HALF DISME

by ELLERY QUEEN

Those few curious men who have chosen to turn off the humdrum highway to hunt for their pleasure along the back trails expect—indeed, they look confidently forward to—many strange en-

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counters; and it is the dull stalk which does not turn up at least a hippogriff. But it remained for Ellery Queen to experience the ultimate excitement. On one of his prowls he collided with a president of the United States.

This would have been joy enough if it had occurred as you might imagine: by chance, on a dark night, in some back street of Washington, D.C., with Secret Service men closing in on the delighted Mr. Queen to question his motives by way of his pockets while a large black bullet-proof limousine rushed up to spirit the powerless president away.

But mere imagination fails in this instance. What is required is the power of fancy, for the truth is fantastic. Ellery's encounter with the president of the United States took place, not on a dark night, but in the unromantic light of several days (although the night played its role, too). Nor was it by chance: the meeting was arranged by a farmer's daughter. And it was not in Washington, D.C., for this president presided over the affairs of the nation from a different city altogether.

Not that the meeting took place in that city either; it did not take place in a city at all, but on a farm some miles south of Philadelphia. Oddest of all, there was no limousine to spirit the chief executive away, for while the president was a man of great wealth, he was still too poor to possess an automobile and, what is more, not all the resources of his government—indeed, not all the riches of the world—could have provided one for him.

There are even more curious facets to this jewel of paradox. This was an encounter in the purest sense, and yet, physically, it did not occur at all. The president in question was dead. And while there are those who would not blink at a rubbing of shoulders or a clasping of hands even though one of the parties was in his grave—and to such persons the thought might occur that the meeting took place on a psychic plane—alas, Ellery Queen is not of their company. He does not believe in ghosts, consequently he never encounters them. So he did not collide with the president's shade either.

And yet their meeting was as palpable as, say, the meeting between two chess masters, one in London and the other in New York, who never leave their respective armchairs and still play a game to a decision. It is even more wonderful than that, for while the chess players merely annihilate space, Ellery and the father of his country annihilated time—a century and a half of it.

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In fine, this is the story of how Ellery Queen matched wits with George Washington.

Those who are finicky about their fashions complain that the arms of coincidence are too long; but in this case the Designer might say that He cut to measure. Or, to put it another way, an event often brews its own mood. Whatever the cause, the fact is that The Adventure of the President's Half Disme, which was to concern itself with the events surrounding President Washington's fifty-ninth birthday, actually first engrossed Ellery on February nineteenth and culminated three days later.

Ellery was in his study that morning, wrestling with several reluctant victims of violence, none of them quite flesh and blood, since his new novel was still in the planning stage. So he was annoyed when Nikki came in with a card.

"James Ezekiel Patch," growled the great man; he was never in his best humor during the planning stage. "I don't know any James Ezekiel Patch, Nikki. Toss the fellow out and get back to transcribing those notes on possible motives—"

"Why, Ellery," said Nikki. "This isn't like you at all."

"What isn't like me?"

"To renege on an appointment."

"Appointment? Does this Patch claim—"

"He doesn't merely claim it. He proves it."

"Someone's balmy," snarled Mr. Queen; and he strode into the living room to contend with James Ezekiel Patch. This, he perceived as soon as James Ezekiel Patch rose from the Queen fireside chair, was likely to be a heroic project. Mr. Patch, notwithstanding his mild, even studious, eyes, seemed to rise indefinitely; he was a large, a very large, man.

"Now what's all this?" demanded Ellery fiercely; for after all Nikki was there.

"That's what I'd like to know," said the large man amiably. "What did you want with me, Mr. Queen?"

"What did I want with you! What did you want with me?"

"I find this very strange, Mr. Queen."

"Now see here, Mr. Patch, I happen to be extremely busy this morning—"

"So am I." Mr. Patch's large thick neck was reddening and his tone was no longer amiable. Ellery took a cautious step backward as his visitor lumbered forward to thrust a slip of yellow paper under his nose. "Did you send me this wire, or didn't you?"

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Ellery considered it tactically expedient to take the telegram, although for strategic reasons he did so with a bellicose scowl.

IMPERATIVE YOU CALL AT MY HOME TOMORROW FEBRUARY NINETEEN PROMPTLY TEN A.M. SIGNED ELLERY QUEEN

"Well, sir?" thundered Mr. Patch. "Do you have something on Washington for me, or don't you?"

"Washington?" said Ellery absently, studying the telegram.

"*George* Washington, Mr. Queen! I'm Patch the antiquarian. I *collect* Washington. I'm an *authority* on Washington. I have a large fortune and I spend it all on Washington! I'd never have wasted my time this morning if your name hadn't been signed to this wire! This is my busiest week of the year. I have engagements to speak on Washington—"

"Desist, Mr. Patch," said Ellery. "This is either a practical joke, or—".

"The Baroness Tchek," announced Nikki clearly. "With another telegram." And then she added, "And Professor John Cecil Shaw, ditto."

The three telegrams were identical.

"Of course I didn't send them," said Ellery thoughtfully, regarding his three visitors. Baroness Tchek was a short powerful woman, resembling a dumpling with gray hair; an angry dumpling. Professor Shaw was lank and long-jawed, wearing a sack suit which hung in some places and failed in its purpose by inches at the extremities. Along with Mr. Patch, they constituted as deliciously queer a trio as had ever congregated in the Queen apartment. Their host suddenly determined not to let go of them. "On the other hand, someone obviously did, using my name . . ."

"Then there's nothing more to be said," snapped the baroness, snapping her bag for emphasis.

"I should think there's a great deal more to be said," began Professor Shaw in a troubled way. "Wasting people's time this way—"

"It's not going to waste any more of *my* time," growled the large Mr. Patch. "Washington's Birthday only three days off—!"

"Exactly," smiled Ellery. "Won't you sit down? There's more in this than meets the eye. . . . Baroness Tchek, if I'm not mistaken, you're the one who brought the fabulous collection of rare coins into

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the United States just before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia? You're in the rare-coin business in New York now?"

"Unfortunately," said the baroness coldly, "one must eat."

"And you, sir? I seem to know you."

"Rare books," said the professor in the same troubled way.

"Of course. John Cecil Shaw, the rare-book collector. We've met at Mim's and other places. I abandon my first theory. There's a pattern here, distinctly unhumorous. An antiquarian, a coin dealer, a collector of rare books—Nikki? Whom have you out there this time?"

"If this one collects anything," muttered Nikki into her employer's ear, "I'll bet it has two legs and hair on its chest. A darned pretty girl—"

"Named Martha Clarke," said a cool voice; and Ellery turned to find himself regarding one of the most satisfying sights in the world.

"Ah, I take it, Miss Clarke, you also received one of these wires signed with my name?"

"Oh, no," said the pretty girl. "I'm the one who sent them."

There was something about the comely Miss Clarke which inspired if not confidence, at least an openness of mind. Perhaps it was the self-possessed manner in which she sat all of them, including Ellery, down in Ellery's living room while she waited on the hearth rug, like a conductor on the podium, for them to settle in their chairs. And it was the measure of Miss Clarke's assurance that none of them was indignant, only curious.

"I'll make it snappy," said Martha Clarke briskly. "I did what I did the way I did it because, first, I had to make sure I could see Mr. Patch, Baroness Tchek, and Professor Shaw today. Second, because I may need a detective before I'm through. . . . Third," she added, almost absently, "because I'm pretty desperate."

"My name is Martha Clarke. My father Tobias is a farmer. Our farm lies just south of Philadelphia, it was built by a Clarke in seventeen sixty-one, and it's been in our family ever since. I won't go gooey on you. We're broke and there's a mortgage. Unless Papa and I can raise twelve thousand dollars in the next couple of weeks we lose the old homestead."

Professor Shaw looked vague. But the baroness said, "Deplorable, Miss Clarke. Now if I'm to run my auction this afternoon—"

And James Ezekiel Patch grumbled, "If it's money you want, young woman—"

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"Certainly it's money I want. But I have something to sell."

"Ah!" said the professor.

"Hm," said the antiquarian.

Mr. Queen said nothing, and Miss Porter jealously chewed the end of her pencil.

"The other day while I was cleaning out the attic, I found an old book."

"Well, now," said Professor Shaw indulgently. "An old book, eh?"

"It's called *The Diary of Simeon Clarke*. Simeon Clarke was Papa's great-great-great-something or other. His *Diary* was privately printed in seventeen ninety-two in Philadelphia, Professor, by a second cousin of his, Jonathan, who was in the printing business there."

"Jonathan Clarke. *The Diary of Simeon Clarke,*" mumbled the cadaverous book collector. "I don't believe I know either, Miss Clarke. Have you . . . ?"

Martha Clarke carefully unclasped a large manila envelope and drew forth a single yellowed sheet of badly printed paper. "The title page was loose, so I brought it along."

Professor Shaw silently examined Miss Clarke's exhibit, and Ellery got up to squint at it. "Of course," said the professor after a long scrutiny, in which he held the sheet up to the light, and performed other mysterious rites, "mere age doesn't connote rarity, nor does rarity of itself constitute value. And while this page looks genuine for the purported period and is rare enough to be unknown to me, still . . ."

"Suppose I told you," said Miss Martha Clarke, "that the chief purpose of the *Diary*—which I have at home—is to tell the story of how George Washington visited Simeon Clarke's farm in the winter of seventeen ninety-one—"

"Clarke's farm? Seventeen ninety-one?" exclaimed James Ezekiel Patch. "Preposterous. There's no record of—"

"And of what George Washington buried there," the farmer's daughter concluded.

By executive order the Queen telephone was taken off its hook, the door was bolted, the shades were drawn, and the long interrogation began. By the middle of the afternoon the unknown chapter in the life of the Father of His Country was fairly sketched.

Early on an icy gray February morning in 1791, Farmer Clarke had looked up from the fence he was mending to observe a splendid

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cortege galloping down on him from the direction of the city of Philadelphia. Outriders thundered in the van, followed by a considerable company of gentlemen on horseback and several great coaches-and-six driven by liveried Negroes.

To Simeon Clarke's astonishment, the entire equipage stopped before his farmhouse. He began to run. He could hear the creak of springs and the snorting of sleek and sweating horses. Gentlemen and lackeys were leaping to the frozen ground, and by the time Simeon had reached the farmhouse, all were elbowing about the first coach, a magnificent affair bearing a coat of arms.

Craning, the farmer saw within the coach a very large, great-nosed gentleman clad in a black velvet suit and a black cloak faced with gold; there was a cocked hat on his wigged head and a great sword in a white leather scabbard at his side. This personage was on one knee, leaning with an expression of considerable anxiety over a chubby lady of middle age, swathed in furs, who was half sitting, half lying on the upholstered seat, her eyes closed and her cheeks waxen under the rouge. Another gentleman, soberly attired, was stooping over the lady, his fingers on one pale wrist.

"I fear," he was saying with great gravity to the kneeling man, "that it would be imprudent to proceed another yard in this weather, Your Excellency. Lady Washington requires physicking and a warm bed immediately."

Lady Washington! Then the large, richly dressed gentleman was the president! Simeon Clarke pushed excitedly through.

"Your Mightiness! Sir!" he cried. "I am Simeon Clarke. We have warm beds, Sarah and I!"

The president considered Simeon briefly. "I thank you, Farmer Clarke. No, no, Dr. Craik. I shall assist Lady Washington myself."

And George Washington carried his Martha Washington into the little Pennsylvania farmhouse of Simeon and Sarah Clarke. An aide informed the Clarkes that President Washington had been on his way to Virginia to celebrate his fifty-ninth birthday in the privacy of Mount Vernon.

Instead, he passed his birthday on the Clarke farm, for the physician insisted that the president's lady could not be moved, even back to the nearby capital, without risking complications. On His Excellency's order the entire incident was kept secret. "It would give needless alarm to the people," he said. But he did not leave Martha's bedside for three days and three nights.

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Presumably during those seventy-two hours, while his lady recovered from her indisposition, the president devoted some thought to his hosts, for on the fourth morning he sent black Christopher, his body servant, to summon the Clarkes. They found George Washington by the kitchen fire, shaven and powdered and in immaculate dress, his stern features composed.

"I am told, Farmer Clarke, that you and your good wife refuse reimbursement for the livestock you have slaughtered in the accommodation of our large company."

"You're my president, sir," said Simeon. "I wouldn't take the money."

"We—we wouldn't take money, Your Worship," stammered Sarah.

"Nevertheless, Lady Washington and I would acknowledge your hospitality in some kind. If you give me leave, I shall plant with my own hands a grove of oak saplings behind your house. And beneath one of the saplings I propose to bury two of my personal possessions." Washington's eyes twinkled ever so slightly. "It is my birthday—I feel a venturesome spirit. Come, Farmer Clarke and Mistress Clarke, would you like that?"

"What—what were they?" choked James Ezekiel Patch, the Washington collector. He was pale.

Martha Clarke replied, "The sword at Washington's side, in its white leather scabbard, and a silver coin the president carried in a secret pocket."

"Silver *coin?*" breathed Baroness Tchek, the rare-coin dealer. "What kind of coin, Miss Clarke?"

"The *Diary* calls it 'a half disme'—with an *s,*" replied Martha Clarke, frowning. "I guess that's the way they spelled dime in those days. The book's full of queer spellings."

"A United States of America half disme?" asked the baroness in a very odd way.

"That's what it says, baroness."

"And this was in seventeen ninety-one?"

"Yes."

The baroness snorted, beginning to rise. "I thought your story was too impossibly romantic, young woman. The United States Mint didn't begin to strike off half dismes until seventeen ninety-two!"

"Half dismes or any other U.S. coinage, I believe," said Ellery. "How come, Miss Clarke?"

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"It was an experimental coin," said Miss Clarke coolly. "The *Diary* isn't clear as to whether it was the Mint which struck it off, or some private agency—maybe Washington himself didn't tell Simeon—but the president did say to Simeon that the half disme in his pocket had been coined from silver he himself had furnished and had been presented to him as a keepsake."

"There's a half disme with a story like that behind it in the possession of the American Numismatic Society," muttered the baroness, "but it's definitely called one of the earliest coins struck off by the Mint. It's possible, I suppose, that in seventeen ninety-one, the preceding year, some specimen coins may have been struck off—"

"Possible my foot," said Miss Clarke. "It's so. The *Diary* says so. I imagine President Washington was pretty interested in the coins to be issued by the new country he was head of."

"Miss Clarke, I—I want that half disme. I mean—I'd like to buy it from you," said the baroness.

"And I," said Mr. Patch carefully, "would like to ah . . . purchase Washington's sword."

"The *Diary,*" moaned Professor Shaw. "I'll buy *The Diary of Simeon Clarke* from you, Miss Clarke!"

"I'll be happy to sell it to you, Professor Shaw—as I said, I found it in the attic and I have it locked up in a highboy in the parlor at home. But as for the other two things . . ." Martha Clarke paused, and Ellery looked delighted. He thought he knew what was coming. "I'll sell you the sword, Mr. Patch, and you the half disme, Baroness Tchek, provided—" and now Miss Clarke turned her clear eyes on Ellery "—provided you, Mr. Queen, will be kind enough to find them!"

And there was the farmhouse in the frosty Pennsylvania morning, set in the barren winter acres, and looking as bleak as only a little Revolutionary house with a mortgage on its head can look in the month of February.

"There's an apple orchard over there," said Nikki as they got out of Ellery's car. "But where's the grove of oaks? I don't see any!" And then she added sweetly, "Do you, Ellery?"

Ellery's lips tightened. They tightened further when his solo on the front-door knocker brought no response.

"Let's go around," he said briefly; and Nikki preceded him with cheerful step.

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Behind the house there was a barn, and beyond the barn there was comfort, at least for Ellery. For beyond the barn there were twelve ugly holes in the earth, and beside each hole lay either a freshly felled oak tree and its stump, or an ancient stump by itself, freshly uprooted. On one of the stumps sat an old man in earth-stained blue jeans, smoking a corncob pugnaciously.

"Tobias Clarke?" asked Ellery.

"Yump."

"I'm Ellery Queen. This is Miss Porter. Your daughter visited me in New York yesterday—"

"Know all about it."

"May I ask where Martha is?"

"Station. Meetin' them there other folks." Tobias Clarke spat and looked away—at the holes. "Don't know what ye're all comin' down here for. Wasn't nothin' under them oaks. Dug 'em all up t'other day. Trees that were standin' and the stumps of the ones that'd fallen years back. Look at one of them holes. Hired hand and me dug down most to China. Washin'ton's Grove, always been called. Now look at it. Firewood—for someone else, I guess."

There was iron bitterness in his tone. "We're losin' this farm, mister, unless . . ." And Tobias Clarke stopped. "Well, maybe we won't," he said. "There's always that there book Martha found."

"Professor Shaw, the rare-book collector, offered your daughter four thousand dollars for it if he's satisfied with it, Mr. Clarke," said Nikki.

"So she told me last night when she got back from New York," said Tobias Clarke. "Four thousand—and we need twelve."

"Well," said Nikki sadly to Ellery, "that's that." She hoped Ellery would get into the car and drive back to New York—immediately.

But Ellery showed no disposition to be sensible. "Perhaps, Mr. Clarke, some trees died in the course of time and just disappeared, stumps, roots, and all. Martha"—Martha!—"said the *Diary* doesn't mention the exact number Washington planted here."

"Look at them holes. Twelve of 'em, ain't there? In a triangle. Man plants trees in a triangle, he plants trees in a triangle. Ye don't see no place between holes big enough for another tree, do ye? Anyways there was the same distance between all the trees. No sir, mister, twelve was all there was ever, and I looked under all twelve."

"What's the extra tree doing in the center of the triangle? You haven't uprooted that one, Mr. Clarke."

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Tobias Clarke spat once more. "Don't know much about trees, do ye? That's a cherry saplin' I set in myself six years ago. Ain't got nothin' to do with George Washington."

Nikki tittered.

"If you'd sift the earth in those holes—"

"I sifted it. Look, mister, either somebody dug that stuff up a hundred years ago or the whole yarn's a Saturday night whopper. Which it most likely is. There's Martha now with them other folks." And Tobias Clarke added, spitting again, "Don't let me be keepin' ye."

"It reveals Washington rather—er—out of character," said James Ezekiel Patch that evening.

They were sitting about the fire in the parlor, as heavy with gloom as with Miss Clarke's dinner; and that, at least in Miss Porter's view, was heavy indeed. Baroness Tchek wore the expression of one who is trapped in a cave; there was no further train until morning, and she had not yet resigned herself to a night in a farmhouse bed.

The better part of the day had been spent poring over *The Diary of Simeon Clarke*, searching for a clue to the buried Washingtonia. But there was no clue; the pertinent passage referred merely to "a Triangle of Oake Trees behinde the red Barn, which His Excellency the President did plant with his own Hands, as he had promis'd me, and then did burie his Sworde and the Half Disme for his Pleasure in a Case of copper beneathe one of the Oakes, the which, he said (the Case), had been fashion'd by Mr. Revere of Boston who is experimenting with this Mettle in his Furnasses."

"How out of character, Mr. Patch?" asked Ellery.

"Washington wasn't given to romanticism," said the large man dryly. "No folderol about him. I don't know anything in his life which prepares us for such a yarn as this. I'm beginning to think—"

"But Professor Shaw himself says the *Diary* is no forgery!" cried Martha Clarke.

"Oh, the book's authentic enough." Professor Shaw seemed unhappy. "But it may simply be a literary hoax, Miss Clarke. The woods are full of them. I'm afraid that unless the story is confirmed by the discovery of that copper case with its contents . . ."

"Oh dear," said Nikki impulsively; and for a moment she was sorry for Martha Clarke, she really was.

But Ellery said, "I believe it. Pennsylvania farmers in seventeen ninety-one weren't given to literary hoaxes, Professor Shaw. As for

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Washington, Mr. Patch—no man can be so rigidly consistent. And with his wife just recovering from an illness—on his own birthday . . ." And Ellery fell silent again.

Almost immediately he leaped from his chair. "Mr. Clarke!"

Tobias stirred from his dark corner. "What?"

"Did you ever hear your father or grandfather—anyone in your family—talk of *another barn behind the house?"*

Martha stared at him. Then she cried, "Papa, that's it! It was a different barn, in a different place, and the original Washington's Grove was cut down, or died—"

"Nope," said Tobias Clarke. "Never was but this one barn. Still got some of its original timbers. Ye can see the date burned into the crosstree—seventeen sixty-one."

Nikki was up early. A steady *hack-hack-hack* borne on the frosty air woke her. She peered out of her back window, the coverlet up to her nose, to see Mr. Ellery Queen against the dawn, like a pioneer, wielding an axe powerfully.

Nikki dressed quickly, shivering, flung her mink-dyed muskrat over her shoulders, and ran downstairs, out of the house, and around it past the barn.

"Ellery! What do you think you're doing? It's practically the middle of the night!"

"Chopping," said Ellery, chopping.

"There's *mountains* of firewood stacked against the barn," said Nikki. "Really, Ellery, I think this is carrying a flirtation too far." Ellery did not reply. "And anyway, there's something—something gruesome and indecent about chopping up trees that George Washington planted. It's vandalism."

"Just a thought," panted Ellery, pausing for a moment. "A hundred and fifty-odd years is a long time. For instance—"

"The copper case," breathed Nikki visibly. "The roots grew *around* it. It's *in* one of these stumps!"

"Now you're functioning," said Ellery, and he raised the ax again.

He was still at it two hours later, when Martha Clarke announced breakfast.

At 11:30 A.M. Nikki returned from driving the professor, the baroness, and James Ezekiel Patch to the railroad station. She found Mr. Queen seated before the fire in the kitchen in his undershirt, while Martha Clarke caressed his naked right arm.

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"Oh!" said Nikki faintly. "I *beg* your pardon."

"Where you going, Nikki?" said Ellery irritably. "Come in. Martha's rubbing liniment into my biceps."

"He's not very accustomed to chopping wood, is he?" asked Martha Clarke in a cheerful voice.

"Reduced those foul 'oakes' to splinters," groaned Ellery. "Martha, ouch!"

"I should think you'd be satisfied *now,*" said Nikki coldly. "I suggest we imitate Patch, Shaw, and the baroness, Ellery. We can't impose on Miss Clarke's hospitality forever."

To Nikki's horror Martha Clarke chose this moment to burst into tears.

"Martha!"

Nikki felt like leaping on her and shaking the cool look back into her perfidious eyes.

"Here—here, now, Martha." That's right, thought Nikki contemptuously. Embrace her in front of me! "It's those three rats. Running out that way! Don't worry—I'll find that sword and half disme for you yet."

"You'll never find them," sobbed Martha, wetting Ellery's undershirt. "Because they're not here. They *never* were here. When you s-stop to think of it . . . *burying* that coin, his sword . . . if the story were true, he'd have given them to Simeon and Sarah . . ."

"Not necessarily," said Ellery. "The old boy had a sense of history, Martha. They all did in those days. They knew they were men of destiny and that the eyes of posterity were upon them. Burying 'em is *just* what Washington would have done!"

"Do you really th-think so?" Martha sniffled. "But even if he did bury them, it doesn't stand to reason that Simeon and Sarah would have let them *stay* buried. They'd have dug that copper box up like rabbits the minute G-George turned his back."

"Two simple countryfolk?" cried Ellery. "Salt of the earth? The new American Earth? Disregard the wishes of His Mightiness, George Washington, First President of the United States? Are you out of your mind? And anyway, what would Simeon do with a dress sword?"

Beat it into a plowshare, thought Nikki—*that's* what he'd do.

"And that half disme. How much could it have been worth in seventeen ninety-one? Martha, they're here under your farm somewhere. You wait—"

"I wish I could b-believe it—"

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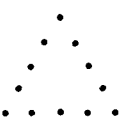
"Shucks, child. Stop crying—"

From the door Miss Porter said stiffly, "You might put your shirt back on, Superman, before you catch pneumonia."

Mr. Queen prowled about the Clarke acres for the remainder of that day, his nose at a low altitude. He spent some time in the barn. He devoted at least twenty minutes to each of the twelve holes in the earth. He reinspected the oaken wreckage of his axwork, like a paleontologist examining an ancient petrifaction for the impression of a dinosaur foot.

He measured off the distance between the holes; and, for a moment, a faint tremor of emotion shook him. George Washington had been a surveyor in his youth; here was evidence that his passion for exactitude had not wearied with the years. As far as Ellery could make out, the twelve oaks had been set into the earth at exactly equal distances, in an equilateral triangle.



It was at this point that Ellery sat down on the seat of a cultivator behind the barn, wondering at his suddenly accelerated circulation. Little memories were knocking at the door. And as he opened to admit them, it was as if he were admitting a personality.

It was, of course, at this time that the sense of personal conflict first obtruded. He had merely to shut his eyes in order to materialize a tall, large-featured man carefully pacing off the distances between twelve points—pacing them off in a sort of objective challenge to the unborn future.

The man Washington had from the beginning possessed an affinity for numbers. It had remained with him all his life. To count things—not so much for the sake of the things, perhaps, as for the counting—had been of the utmost importance to him. As a boy in Mr. Williams's school in Westmoreland he excelled in arithmetic. Long division, subtraction, weights and measures—to calculate cords of wood and pecks of peas, pints and gallons and avoirdupois—young George delighted in these as other boys delighted in horseplay.

As a man, he merely directed his passion into the channel of his possessions. Through his possessions he apparently satisfied his

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curious need for enumeration. He was not content simply to keep accounts of the acreage he owned, its yield, his slaves, his pounds and pence. Ellery recalled the extraordinary case of Washington and the seed.

George Washington once calculated the number of seeds in a pound troy weight of red clover. Not appeased by the statistics on red clover, Washington then went to work on a pound of timothy seed. His conclusions were: 71,000 and 298,000. His appetite unsatisfied, he thereupon fell upon the problem of New River grass. Here he tackled a calculation worthy of his prowess: his mathematical labors produced the great, pacifying figure of 844,800.

This man was so obsessed with numbers, Ellery thought, staring at the ruins of Washington's Grove, that he counted the windows in each house of his Mount Vernon estate and the number of "Paynes" in each window of each house, and then triumphantly recorded the exact number of each in his own handwriting.

It was like a hunger, requiring periodic appeasement. In 1747, as a boy of fifteen, George Washington drew "A Plan of Major Law: Washington Turnip Field as Survey'd by me." In 1786, at the age of fifty-four, General Washington, the most famous man in the world, occupied himself with determining the exact elevation of his piazza above the Potomac's high-water mark. No doubt he experienced a warmer satisfaction thereafter for knowing that when he sat on his piazza looking down the river he was sitting exactly 124 feet 10½ inches above it.

And in 1791, as president of the United States, Ellery mused, he was striding about right here, setting saplings into the ground, twelve of them in an equilateral triangle, and beneath one of them he buried a copper case containing his sword and the half disme coined from his own silver. Beneath one of them. . . .

But it was not beneath one of them. Or had it been? And had long ago been dug up by a Clarke? But the story had apparently died with Simeon and Sarah. On the other hand . . .

Ellery found himself irrationally reluctant to conclude the obvious. George Washington's lifelong absorption with figures kept intruding. Twelve trees, equidistant, in an equilateral triangle.

"What is it?" he kept asking himself, almost angrily. "Why isn't it satisfying me?"

And then, in the gathering dusk, a very odd explanation insinuated itself. *Because it wouldn't have satisfied him!*

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That's silly, Ellery said to himself abruptly. It has all the earmarks of a satisfying experience. There is no more satisfying figure in all geometry than an equilateral triangle. It is closed, symmetrical, definite, a whole and balanced and finished thing.

But it wouldn't have satisfied George Washington . . . for all its symmetry and perfection.

Then perhaps there is a symmetry and perfection beyond the cold beauty of figures?

At this point, Ellery began to question his own postulates . . .

They found him at 10:30, crouched on the cultivator seat, numb and staring.

He permitted himself to be led into the house; he suffered Nikki to subject him to the indignity of having his shoes and socks stripped off and his frozen feet rubbed to life; he ate Martha Clarke's dinner—all with a detachment and indifference which alarmed the girls and even made old Tobias look uneasy.

"If it's going to have this effect on him," began Martha, and then she said, "Ellery, give it up. Forget it." But she had to shake him before he heard her.

He shook his head. "They're there."

"Where?" cried the girls simultaneously.

"In Washington's Grove."

"Ye found 'em!" croaked Tobias Clarke, half rising.

"No."

The Clarkes and Nikki exchanged glances.

"Then how can you be so certain they're buried there, Ellery?" asked Nikki gently.

Ellery looked bewildered. "Darned if I know *how* I know," he said, and he even laughed a little. "Maybe George Washington told me." Then he stopped laughing and went into the firelit parlor and—pointedly—slid the doors shut.

At ten minutes past midnight Martha Clarke gave up the contest.

"Isn't he *ever* going to come out of there?" she said, yawning.

"You never can tell what Ellery will do," replied Nikki.

"Well, I can't keep my eyes open another minute."

"Funny," said Nikki. "I'm not the least bit sleepy."

"You city girls."

"You country girls."

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They laughed. Then they stopped laughing, and for a moment there was no sound in the kitchen but the patient sentry-walk of the grandfather clock and the snores of Tobias from above.

"Well," said Martha. Then she said, "I just *can't.* Are you staying up, Nikki?"

"For a little while. You go to bed, Martha."

"Yes. Well. Good night."

"Good night, Martha."

At the door Martha turned suddenly. "Did he say *George Washington told him?"*

"Yes."

Martha went rather quickly up the stairs.

Nikki waited fifteen minutes. Then she tiptoed to the foot of the stairs and listened. She heard an uneasy moan from the direction of Martha's bedroom, as if she were dreaming an unwholesome dream. Nikki set her jaw grimly, went to the parlor doors, and slid them open.

Ellery was on his knees before the fire. His elbows were resting on the floor. His face was propped in his hands.

"Ellery, what on earth—?"

"Nikki. I thought you'd gone to bed long ago." In the firelight his face was haggard.

"But what have you been *doing?* You look exhausted!"

"I am. I've been wrestling with a man who could bend a horseshoe with his naked hands. A very strong man. In more ways than one."

"What are you talking about? Who?"

"George Washington. Go to bed, Nikki."

"George . . . Washington?"

"Go to bed."

". . . *Wrestling* with him?"

"Trying to break through his defenses. Get into his mind. It's not an easy mind to get into. He's been dead for such a long time—that makes the difference. The dead are stubborn, Nikki. Aren't you going to bed?"

Nikki backed out shivering.

The house *was* icy.

It was even icier when an inhuman bellow brought Nikki out of bed with a leap.

But it was only Ellery.

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He was somewhere up the hall, in the first glacial light of dawn, hammering on Martha Clarke's door.

"Martha. *Martha!* Wake up, and tell me where I can find a book in this damned house! A biography of Washington—a history of the United States—an almanac . . . *anything!*"

The parlor fire had long since given up the ghost. Nikki and Martha in wrappers, and Tobias Clarke in an ancient bathrobe over his long underwear, stood around shivering and bewildered as a disheveled, demonic Ellery leafed eagerly through a 1921 edition of *The Farmer's Fact Book and Complete Compendium.*

"Here it is!" The words shot out of his mouth like bullets.

"What is it, Ellery?"

"What on earth are you looking for?"

"He's loony, I tell ye!"

Ellery turned with a look of ineffable peace, closing the book.

"That's it," he said.

"What's it?"

"Vermont. The state of Vermont."

"Vermont . . . ?"

"Vermont?"

"Vermont. What in the crawlin' creepers has Vermont got to do with—?"

"Vermont," said Ellery with a tired smile, "did not enter the Union until March fourth, seventeen ninety-one. So that proves it, don't you see?"

"Proves *what?"* shrieked Nikki.

"Where George Washington buried his sword and half disme.

"Because," said Ellery in the rapidly lightening dawn behind the barn, "Vermont was the fourteenth state to do so. The *fourteenth.* Tobias, would you get me an ax, please?"

"An ax," mumbled Tobias. He shuffled away, shaking his head.

"Come on, Ellery, I'm d-dying of c-cold!" chattered Nikki, dancing up and down before the cultivator.

"Ellery," said Martha Clarke piteously, "I don't understand *any* of this."

"It's very simple, Martha—oh, thank you, Tobias—as simple," said Ellery, "as simple arithmetic. Numbers, my dears—numbers tell this remarkable story. Numbers and their influence on our first president who was, above all things, a number-man. That was my

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key. I merely had to discover the lock to fit it into. Vermont was the lock. And the door's open."

Nikki seated herself on the cultivator. You had to give Ellery his head in a situation like this; you couldn't drive him for beans. Well, she thought grudgingly, seeing how pale and how tired-looking he was after a night's wrestling with George Washington, he's earned it.

"The number was wrong," said Ellery solemnly, leaning on Tobias's axe. "Twelve trees. Washington apparently planted twelve trees—Simeon Clarke's *Diary* never did mention the number twelve, but the evidence seemed unquestionable—there were twelve oaks in an equilateral triangle, each one an equal distance from its neighbor.

"And yet . . . I felt that *twelve* oaks couldn't be, perfect as the triangle was. Not if they were planted by George Washington. Not on February the twenty-second, New Style, in the year of our Lord, seventeen ninety-one.

"Because on February the twenty-second, seventeen ninety-one—in fact, until March the fourth, when Vermont entered the Union to swell its original number by one—there was *another* number in the United States so important, so revered, so much a part of the common speech and the common living—and dying—that it was more than a number; it was a solemn and sacred thing; almost not a number at all.

"It overshadowed all other numbers like the still-unborn Paul Bunyan. It was memorialized on the new American flag in the number of its stars and the number of its stripes. It was a number of which George Washington was the standard-bearer!—the head and only recently the strong right arm of the new Republic which had been born out of the blood and muscle of its integers.

"It was a number which was in the hearts and minds and mouths of all Americans.

"No. If George Washington, who was not merely the living symbol of all this but carried with him that extraordinary compulsion toward numbers which characterized his whole temperament besides, had wished to plant a number of oak trees to commemorate a birthday visit in the year seventeen ninety-one . . . he would have, he could have, selected only one number out of all the mathematical trillions at his command—*the number thirteen.*"

The sun was looking over the edge of Pennsylvania at Washington's Grove.

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"George Washington planted thirteen trees here that day, and under one of them he buried Paul Revere's copper case. Twelve of the trees he arranged in an equilateral triangle, and we know that the historic treasure was not under any of the twelve. Therefore he must have buried the case under the thirteenth—a thirteenth oak sapling which grew to oakhood and, some time during the past century and a half, withered and died and vanished so utterly that it left no trace.

"Where would Washington have planted that thirteenth oak? Because beneath the spot where it once stood—there lies the copper case containing his sword and the first coin to be struck off in the new United States."

And Ellery glanced tenderly at the cherry sapling which Tobias Clarke had set into the earth in the middle of Washington's Grove six years before.

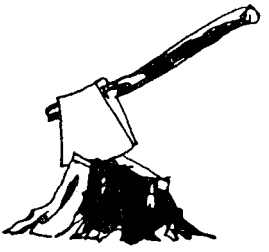
"Washington the surveyor, the geometer, the man whose mind cried out for integral symmetries? Obviously, in only one place: *In the center of the triangle.* Any other place would be utterly and absolutely unthinkable."

And Ellery hefted Tobias's ax and strode toward the six-year-old tree. He raised the ax.

But suddenly he lowered it, turned, and said in a rather startled way, "See here! Isn't today . . . ?"

"Washington's Birthday," said Nikki.

Ellery grinned and began to chop down the cherry tree.



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Colorful as the milieu of a traveling circus is, it presents problems for writers of the true whodunit. Always on the move, picking up transient help in every town, the show doesn't readily provide a closed circle of suspects. Yet here is Doug Allyn with a circus tale that comes as close as anything he's done to a true whodunit . . .

THE BEARDED LADY

by DOUG ALLYN

"Here's the thing about elephants," Vic said. "They think they're people. Or at least Eloise does, and she's the only elephant we got. She likes being around folks, likes the sound of voices. She wants to be your pal. That's why she's so damned dangerous."

"I don't understand," I said.

"It's simple," Vic said. "If she was mean, you'd keep an eye on her. You'd better keep an eye on her anyway. If she accidentally steps on your foot, you'll need a cane the rest of your life. And if she balls her trunk and gives you a love slap she can break your arm, or your ribs, maybe rearrange your face. She also craps a lot. Your number one job will be cleaning up after her. You'll also have to evacuate her before every show."

"Evacuate her?" I echoed.

"That's right," he said, smiling for the first time. He was a blocky man, fortyish, square face, squat body, five six or so. His hair was coarse and black, brush cut. He was wearing a white shirt and tie. His sleeves were rolled up, showing muscular forearms matted with dark fur. His teeth were horse-sized, with gaps between them. He had a good smile all the same. "You have to clean Eloise out with a rubber glove and a can of lard before every show, to prevent accidents onstage. Still want to sign on?"

"I grew up on a farm," I said. "Manure doesn't scare me. I want the job."

Vic shrugged. "Minimum wage to start. Bump you two bucks after two weeks, if you're worth it. You share a trailer with the

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canvasman, cook your own chow in the microwave. You got any problems I should know about? Like with the law?"

"No."

"Good. Some people think a traveling show like mine is a good place to hide. It's not. If there's trouble in a town we're playing, the circus is the first place the cops look. And sometimes they're not very friendly about it."

"I've never had trouble with the police."

"You drink?"

"I've been known to tip a beer," I said. "I'm not a drunk."

"Then what are you?"

"How do you mean?"

"C'mon, Devlin, you gotta be what? Mid-thirties? You've obviously got some education. Why do you want a job like this?"

"I'm a teacher. School's out, I need a summer job."

"What do you teach?"

"English and creative writing. Wayne Junior College."

"Ah. And you've decided to run off and join a circus for the summer? Midlife crisis, something like that?"

"Maybe something like it," I admitted.

"A romantic," he said, with that infectious grin. "Good. I like romantics. They remind me what a great time I'm supposed to be havin' in this business. Okay, Teach, see the old guy hosing down that truck? His name's Carnahan. Call him Carny. He'll get you some coveralls, put you to work. You'll be handling the livestock. And Teach, I'll bet you two weeks' pay you don't last three days. No offense."

"None taken," I said. "But I'll take the bet."

I nearly lost it. Carny was a grizzled prune of an Irishman who'd been with circuses longer than I've been alive. He worked me like a slave the first few weeks. It wasn't personal. Carny hated townies as a matter of principle. I think he was trying to make me quit. He almost did.

The Maselli Brothers Circus of the Stars consisted of four semi trucks and an office trailer. We carried our own petting zoo, Eloise the Elephant, two Shetland ponies, three goats, two sheep, and a potbellied pig. The animals had to be brushed or scrubbed and their stalls mucked out every day. The trucks were washed after every move.

I shoveled manure by the ton, tossed eighty-pound hay bales around, loaded and unloaded trucks. During the school year I play

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squash and work out semi-regularly at a health club. I thought I was in pretty good shape. I was wrong.

The first few mornings I could barely crawl out of my bunk. My shoulders ached and my arms felt like they'd been sewn on backwards. I dropped ten surplus pounds the first two weeks. But I also slept better than I had in years.

I'd expected the physical labor, but the rest of the life was a surprise. I soon realized that the little I knew about circuses I got from the movies. The Greatest Show on Earth. Charlton Heston. Betty Hutton. A cast of thousands. Our circus was more like a cast of a dozen. Make that a half-dozen.

Vic Maselli owned the show, but he also turned a hand at whatever needed doing. The road crew was a trio. Carny was the foreman, I handled the stock. My roommate, the canvasman in charge of getting the tents up and down, was a Chippewa ex-convict named Bobby Chingwa. The ex-con label sounds worse than it was. I taught remedial classes for a while at the Wayne County jail and I met a lot of cons. Bobby wasn't a hard-core bad guy. He hit forty with a drinking problem, and tried to turn his life around by sticking up a 7-Eleven. He served eight years in Jackson, and now each day was new. I knew the feeling. My wife had divorced me in April after ten years, two children. She said our life was boring, that I'd turned into a stuffed shirt.

And she was right. So I tried to turn my life around by signing on for a circus summer. And now each day was new.

As a roommate, Bobby was perfect. A trim, compactly built warrior with dark eyes, a mane of prematurely gray hair, and a neatly trimmed beard, he was a neatness freak who kept our trailer immaculate. But he seldom slept in his bunk. Prison had made him claustrophobic, so he usually slept out under the sky, or in the cab of the canvas truck with the windows wide open.

As a young man he'd run away to Canada to live with the Cree awhile, searching for his Native American identity. He didn't find it. He said Vic's outfit, moving from one hunting ground to another and putting up tents, was as close as he could come to a tribal heritage. I wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. With Bobby it was hard to tell.

The only performers who traveled with us were a show-biz family. Mom and stepfather, Paula and Pete Gamez had an act called the Amazing Pastel Poodles. Paula's kids, Jeff and Jena, billed as the Trabert Twins, were our star attraction. Their act, trick riding and

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trapeze combined, was spectacular. Jena was pretty spectacular all by herself, tall, blond, twentyish. I'll admit, I indulged in a few fantasies when I met her, but they died quickly. The twins were on their own private wavelength, ultra-serious athletes totally dedicated to making it in show biz. Since I was a roustabout dedicated to making it through the summer, we didn't have much in common.

I got along better with their gofer Roddy, a hulking Hoosier not much brighter than a nightlight. He had a good heart though, and animals responded to him as if he were their next of kin.

The other acts that comprised any given show were transients, booked only for certain dates on the tour. We moved almost every day, playing five or six towns a week, sometimes under the big top, sometimes in gyms or civic auditoriums.

The acts were usually waiting when we arrived, and every engagement was like a family reunion. Performers who hadn't seen each other in months or years met again to do a few shows together, then continued on to other tours in other towns.

It was an alien lifestyle for me, no faculty meetings, no tests to correct. No security whatever. But I liked the work and the show people. I even started writing again. I didn't have anything specific in mind yet, but I began taking notes on the characters I met and the stories I heard. I was discreet about it, so that people would talk naturally around me, but every night I typed a few pages into my little laptop computer, and every few weeks I forwarded the data I'd collected via modem to my home computer. The summer flew by in a blur. I was having the time of my life. And then it all crashed.

We were working Catawpha, a small town in southern Michigan. We'd just finished the Sunday matinee and I was leading Eloise back to her paddock when I saw a scuffle near the petting zoo.

Two guys were hassling Roddy, the Trabert Twins' gofer. Roddy's a placid type, I'd never seen him angry, but he was now.

The two men had him backed up against the horse trailer, shouting. As I trotted over, Roddy tried to pull away, and the taller man, a redheaded cracker, punched him hard to the midsection. Roddy dropped to his knees, gagging. The cracker kicked him down and would have stomped him if I hadn't hit him full in the back with a flying tackle that slammed us both into the petting-ring fence.

The man I'd tackled was crumpled beside me in the dirt, groaning. I wasn't much better off, stunned by the impact, my head spinning. Then his partner was kneeling in front of me pointing a gun in my face. And holding up a badge. He told me to put my hands on my

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head, slowly, and turn around. I shook my head, trying to clear it. A big mistake. He thought I was saying no. And then his partner hit me from the side, and everything went hazy. They slapped handcuffs on me and shoved me into the back of an unmarked car with Roddy.

I came out of the fog in the back room of a police station. I was alone, handcuffed to a metal chair in a gray room, gray walls, bare concrete floor, waterstained ceiling tiles. I was still trying to remember what had happened when the door opened.

The redhead I'd tackled at the fairgrounds came in. His face was pudgy and heavily freckled. Howdy Doody with a serious mean streak. He was dressed casually, a gray sportshirt, Dockers, a black canvas shoulder holster. An ID badge was clipped to his collar. Welch, John, Deputy Sheriff. He was also sporting a walnut-sized purplish welt under his right eye. Good.

His partner was older, fiftyish, wearing faded denims. He had watery blue eyes and looked like a retired cowpoke. Meadows, his nametag said. I couldn't make out his first name.

They were followed by a giant African American in a short-sleeved tan uniform. Which surprised me a little. There'd only been a handful of blacks at the matinee. His hair was drill-sergeant short, salt and pepper, and his brown eyes were liquid and intelligent. And unreadable. He was carrying a steel clipboard and had an air of authority.

He leaned over me, frowning at the cut on my forehead where I'd dented the corral bar. Tsk, tsk. He pulled a chair up beside me and sat down. The two deputies, Welch and Meadows, took up stations by the door, watching.

"You're Thomas Devlin, correct?" the giant said, glancing at his clipboard. "I'm Sheriff Lamar Zeebow. Before we talk, I'm going to read you your rights, okay?" He recited my Miranda rights quickly, from memory. "Do you want an attorney, Mr. Devlin? Or medical attention?"

"Not now. Maybe later, when I file charges for assault and false arrest."

"That's your privilege." He shrugged, unimpressed. "Mr. Devlin, you're in custody for interfering with police officers in the performance of their duty. Do you want to give me your version of what happened?"

"The two goons by the door there were mugging a guy I work with, that's what happened. I tried to help him, got slugged for my

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troubles, and here we are. I didn't know they were cops. They weren't in uniform."

"The officers say you attacked them without giving them a chance to identify themselves."

"Maybe so," I conceded. "Since Red there was kicking Roddy while he was down, I assumed he was a mugger. Wouldn't you?"

"I didn't kick anybody," Welch snapped. "You just—"

"Button it, Jack," Zeebow said without raising his voice. "The man they were arresting, that would be Clarence Rodman?"

"I don't know. Roddy's the only name I know him by."

"You don't know his name? How long have you known him?"

"A couple of months. He travels with one of the acts."

"Which act?"

"The Trabert Twins. He takes care of their horses and gear."

"Horses? What kind of an act do they do, these twins?"

"They trick ride and fly."

"Try that in English, please," Zeebow asked.

"Sorry. Their act's a mix. Part trick riding, part acrobatics, you know, a trapeze act?"

"I see. And how old would you say they are?"

"How old? I don't know, twentyish, maybe less. Why?"

He made a note on his clipboard. "Can you tell me where you were earlier today, Mr. Devlin?"

"What time? I was all over the place, rigging canvas, cleaning stalls, whatever."

"But you never left the fairgrounds? Never went into town?"

"No."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Probably a dozen people, I imagine. I was around all day."

"I see. And Rodman? Was he there too?"

"I . . . can't really say. I saw him around noon or so, watering the Traberts' horses. I may have seen him after that, I'm honestly not sure. I'm still a little groggy."

"Tell me, does the name Keenan mean anything to you? Joseph Keenan? He owns a Shell gas station in Catawpha."

"Never heard of him. I've never been here before in my life. Look, what's this all about?"

The door opened and another deputy stuck his head in. "Sheriff? There's a Mr. Maselli and another guy out here to see the prisoners. They're pretty hot."

"Tell 'em we'll be a few more minutes."

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The deputy nodded and ducked out.

"Your friend Rodman seems a bit childlike," Zeebow said. "Is he mentally handicapped?"

"He's no genius," I admitted. "But he gets by all right. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Like what?"

"Why were your men roughing Roddy up? If they'd just arrested him, I might have asked what was going on, but I wouldn't have interfered. I haven't been in a fight since grade school. Is kicking suspects normal police procedure around here?"

He eyed me a moment, then shook his head. "No, it's not. How about it, Officer Meadows? Did either Officer Welch or yourself kick the suspect?"

Meadows blinked, glancing quickly back and forth between Zeebow and Welch. "Can I, ah, can I talk to you alone a minute, Lamar?"

"What you can do, Officer Meadows," Zeebow said, swiveling in his chair to face the smaller man, "is answer my question straight up. Did Jack kick the suspect?"

"I—can't really say, sir. Devlin came crashing in and in the scuffle things got confused. Maybe Rodman got kicked accidentally. You know how it is."

"Actually I don't. But I think you two will tell me about it later. In depth. Tell Mr. Maselli he can come in now."

Welch glared furiously at his partner as Meadows stepped into the hall. A moment later he ushered Vic and Carny in.

Vic was wearing a power suit, a seven-hundred-dollar three-piece pinstripe. He looked a bit like a bear dressed in its Sunday best. Carny was wearing grubby circus coveralls, his wispy hair awry. He looked scruffy as a derelict. I was very glad to see them both.

Carny knelt beside my chair, frowned at the gash on my forehead, then held his hand up in front of my eyes. "How many fingers?"

"Three," I said.

"He'll live," Carny said, getting stiffly to his feet. "Cut won't need stitches. A Band-Aid'll do for it."

"I'm okay," I said. "What about Roddy?"

"Not so good," Vic said. "I just saw him for a minute. He wouldn't talk to me. What the hell's going on here, Sheriff?"

"Mr. Devlin's being questioned about interfering with a police officer," Zeebow said calmly. "Mr. Rodman's being held on suspicion of murder."

"Murder?" Vic echoed. "What murder?"

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"A service-station owner named Joe Keenan was beaten to death early this morning. His assailant used a steel tent stake. Quite possibly one from your circus."

"Bull," Vic said bluntly. "One tent stake looks like another, and even if it was from our show anybody could grab one. What makes you think Dev or Roddy had anything to do with it?"

"Because he already did it once," Welch blurted out. "He beat a guy to death the last time he was here. And got off scot-free."

"I don't believe it," Vic said. "Roddy wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone kill anyone."

Welch hesitated, uncertain. "Go ahead, Officer Welch," Zeebow said. "You know the story better than I do."

"Yes sir, if you say so," Welch said, glancing uneasily at Meadows. "A dozen or so years back, three local guys, soldiers, were home on leave here in town. They had a few beers and went to a circus at the fairgrounds. Keenan was feelin' a little frisky, so he paid Rodman for sex with a woman in the show. But then Rodman jumped him, tried to roll him. Keenan's buddies stepped in to help and Rodman killed one of 'em. Chad Nesbitt. Stove his head in with a steel tent stake. The same way we found Keenan this morning."

"If that's what happened, how did Roddy get off?" Carny put in. "Circus folks don't get breaks in local courts."

"He got a wuss judge, that's how," Welch said bitterly. "Rodman said the soldiers attacked the woman and he tried to stop it. And the judge bought his story."

"What did the woman say?" I asked.

Welch hesitated. "Nothing," he said grudgingly. "Not a thing."

"Nothing?" Zeebow echoed, frowning. He glanced at Meadows.

"Actually, she . . . couldn't talk," Meadows said. "In the scuffle she got a broken jaw and a skull fracture. She claimed she couldn't remember what happened. With no way to determine the facts, the judge directed a finding of justifiable homicide for Rodman, and everybody walked away."

"Until this morning when Rodman beat Joe Keenan to death," Welch said. "Christ, eight years on the force, I've seen more'n a few bodies, but I haven't seen anybody killed like that since Nesbitt. That crazy retard—"

"Eight years on the force?" I interrupted. "I thought you said this happened twelve years ago?"

Welch froze in midsentence, blinking like a deer in the headlights.

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"He's right," Zeebow said, "or at least that was my understanding."

"Jesus, Jack, I'm sorry, but you're gonna have to tell him," Meadows said, looking helplessly at his partner. "It'll come out anyway as soon as he sees the records."

"What's going to come out?" Zeebow asked. "What the heck's going on here?"

"I was . . . there," Welch said, swallowing. "I was the third soldier. I was only eighteen. Just a kid. Hell, we all were."

"Right," Vic said. "Just a kid. Out for a few laughs. Only the lady got a broken jaw and a skull fracture."

"And now two of the men involved are dead," Zeebow countered, "and Rodman is our prime suspect. The woman in the case, what was her name, Jack?"

"Del Rio," Welch said, "Paulina Del Rio."

Zeebow turned to Vic. "Is she with your show?"

"No one by that name's with my outfit," Vic said positively.

"But show people change their names sometimes, don't they? Stage names, that sort of thing?"

"Sometimes," Vic admitted. "But she'd still use her real name for contracts and social security. I don't know any Paulina Del Rio."

"She was a bearded lady," Welch offered.

"What?" Vic said.

"A bearded lady. That was why Keenan picked her out. We were all pretty drunk and Joe got a little crazy. Hey, who wants to bang a bearded lady, you know? We didn't mean any harm. Hell, we were probably the best thing that ever happened to her."

I thought Vic was going to explode. His neck flushed as he struggled to keep a clamp on his temper. Zeebow saw it too, and eased calmly out of his chair, stepping between Vic and Welch.

"Officer Welch, go find me the old file on this case, then wait at your desk until I'm finished here. And by the way, Jack, you're suspended until further notice."

Welch eyed him with disbelief. "You can't be serious. Look, all this happened before I was ever on the force, I was—"

"A kid, right," Zeebow said. "But you weren't a kid this morning when you roughed up Rodman and lied to me about this. Now move it. Unless you'd rather hand me your badge right now."

Welch shook his head slowly, then turned and stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

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"Gentlemen, I'm sorry about this," Zeebow said. "Welch is one of the problems I inherited when I took over this department two years ago. If he roughed up Rodman because of a personal beef, he'll be held accountable, I promise you. But it doesn't change our situation. We still have a killing on our hands. Now what about this bearded lady, Maselli?"

"I can't help you," Vic said. "I run a circus, not a sideshow. A bearded lady would be a carnival attraction."

"You've heard the joke though," Carny put in, frowning. "Everybody has. It's been around for years."

"What joke?" Zeebow asked.

"Well, not a joke exactly," Carny explained. "More like a tall tale. Supposedly some guy was so dumb he tried to pimp for a bearded lady. It happened here or there, last month or last year. I thought that's all it was. A joke."

"I don't think Mr. Rodman would find it very funny, and neither would Keenan's family," Zeebow said. "What about you, Devlin? Ever hear one about a bearded lady? You must be an expert on stories."

"What does that mean?"

"You're working as a roustabout, but when I ran your name through our computer you came up as an English teacher at the Wayne County Jail. You're even listed as an author."

"I used to teach there. And I published a few books awhile back."

"Then it's an odd coincidence, wouldn't you say?" Zeebow persisted. "This thing was dead as a dog in the road all these years. Then you show up, a writer, maybe looking for a story. And suddenly it starts up all over again."

"Maybe it's odd," I admitted, "but it's just a coincidence."

"We'll see," Zeebow said grimly. "After I finish questioning Rodman I may want to talk to other people in your show, Maselli. I'm going to put a man at the fairgrounds entrance to make sure they're available. Nobody in or out."

"Hey, give us a break," Vic said. "We've got a show to do tonight. Besides, you won't get anywhere by rousting us. We've been shaken down so many times in so many towns we get tongue-tied around local law, you know? Look, let me ask around and check my contacts in the business. If anybody knows anything about your bearded lady, I give you my word I'll pass it along."

Zeebow met his eyes a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough. You do your show and talk to your people, Maselli. I've got some checking

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of my own to do. But the next time I see you, you'd better have something for me, or I'm going to shake down your outfit. And if I find so much as a pill or a joint I'll tie you up here for the next month."

He knelt beside my chair and unlocked my handcuffs. "As for you, Devlin, you interfered with an arrest. Maybe you were justified, maybe not, but the investigation is still open and you're still part of it. You're free to go. For now." He rose and held the door open for us.

I followed Vic and Carny out into the anteroom. Welch was sitting at a desk, his face buried in his hands. He glanced up as we passed, and if looks could kill, he'd have been a mass murderer.

Meadows returned my wallet and watch to me at the counter. I signed a receipt and turned to go, then hesitated. "Hey, Zeebow. You said Keenan was killed at his service station, right? How did Roddy know he'd be there?"

"What?"

"We rolled into town around midnight. If Keenan was killed this morning, how did Roddy find him so quickly?"

"Maybe he checked the phone book," Welch said acidly.

"No chance," I said. "Roddy's illiterate. He can barely write his name."

"Then maybe someone helped him," Zeebow said. "I imagine an English teacher can probably read pretty well."

He was looking me over like a wolf at lunchtime. I decided to quit while I was behind.

I gave Vic a brief recap of what had happened as he drove us back to the fairgrounds in his leased white Cadillac. Carny listened in silence, slumped in the backseat, his arms folded, chewing an unlit cigar. "Why'd you butt in?" Vic asked when I'd finished, his eyes locked on the road ahead.

"The guy was kicking Roddy. I guess I just lost it."

"You're full of surprises, Teach," Carny said, "and I'm not sure I like some of 'em. What was that business about you being a writer? Is that why you signed on? Soakin' up a little color, life with the freaks?"

"Not at all. I may write about this summer sometime, but that's not why I took this job. I just wanted to get away from my life for a while."

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Vic sighed. "The way that cop talked, you might get away from it for twenty years. What a mess. You know who the woman he mentioned probably is, don't you?"

I nodded. "Paula Gamez. Her face is twisted, and her grip on reality's pretty shaky. Why didn't you tell him?"

"Because I don't *know* that she's the woman, and even if she is, she at least deserves a warning before she gets thrown to the dogs. Do you suppose her kids know about this?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I think they're about to find out, one way or another."

"Yeah," Vic said, shaking his head glumly. "I'm afraid so."

At the fairgrounds, he pulled the Caddy up in front of the big top and tapped the horn three times. We were already gathering a crowd of show people as we climbed out of the car.

"Okay, move on in people," Vic called, "we've got trouble. The local law's holding Roddy Rodman for murder. Those of you who know him know it's unlikely as hell that he could do such a thing, but the police may be out later to ask questions. Please don't try to smoke 'em. If they think we're hiding anything it'll only make things worse.

"There's more. When word of this gets out, it may put a major dent in our business. I don't want to cancel the show, though. If it's all right with everybody, I say we go on, and put whatever we earn at the gate into a defense fund for Roddy. Any objections?"

"You mean do our show for nothin'?" Pete Gamez said. "And maybe play to nobody?"

"We've all played to empty seats before," Jeff Trabert said. "Roddy's our friend, so Jena and I are willing. Kubrick, how about you? How many times has Roddy looked after your bear while you put the make on some little fairgrounds flower?"

"Not as often as he's dumped you in bed when you're too trashed to find your trailer," Ben Kubrick shot back. Kubrick was a gangly stork of a guy, with posture like a question mark, thick granny glasses, and a warped sense of humor. "Yeah, I'm in. You'd all do the same for me, I hope?"

"Not a chance," Jena Trabert said. "For your bear, maybe."

"Speaking as an authority on white man's jails," Bobby Chingwa offered, "Roddy's in a tough spot. Local slammers are the pits. Personally, I'd rather be staked out on an anthill anytime."

"I'll remember that the next time you're late," Vic said. "How about it, people? Is everybody willing to kick in their share of the

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gate?" He didn't get a rousing cheer, but there wasn't much grumbling either. The show was a go.

"Good," Vic nodded. "Showtime in forty minutes, customers or no. Jena, where's your mother?"

"Asleep in our motor home, I think, why?"

"I need to talk to her. It's important. Would you bring her to my office, please? Jeff, we'd better talk inside. You too, Devlin." Pete Gamez hadn't been invited, but he followed Jeff and me up the metal steps into the office trailer anyway.

Jeff Trabert was twentyish, six feet or so, with a rangy frame and a shoulder-length rock-'n-'roll mane. He had aquiline features and an odd, almost oriental cast to his eyes. The twins weren't identical, but they accentuated their resemblance by dressing alike. Their hair was the same shade of tawny blond, but that may have had more to do with cosmetics than genetics. It was easy to tell them apart. For one thing, Jena's hair was shorter. And there was nothing masculine about her. She was magnetic and knew it.

Her stepfather, Pete Gamez, knew it too. He guarded her like a pit bull. Pete was a barrel of a man, squat, with heavy jowls and beetle brows. He could have passed as a cousin of Kubrick's dancing bear.

Vic turned to face us, resting a haunch on the corner of his desk. "Guys, we've got major trouble here."

"You mean Roddy has, don't you?" Pete said.

"Roddy's one of us," Jeff said mildly. "As far as I'm concerned he's as much family as you are, Pete. Maybe more."

"How long's he been with you?" Vic said hastily, trying to avert a family spat. "Quite awhile?"

"Forever," Jeff said. "He handled Mom's horse before her accident, and she hired him again as soon as we were old enough to train with the horses ourselves."

"The local cops say Roddy killed somebody here a dozen years ago. Know anything about that?"

"That's not possible," Jeff said flatly. "Roddy couldn't do anything like that."

"Was he working for your family then?"

"I think so, unless it happened while Mom was off the road after her accident."

"This accident Paula had," Vic asked. "What happened exactly?"

"Her accident?" Jeff echoed, suddenly wary. "She took a bad spill off her mare, broke her jaw and fractured her skull and . . . Well, you know how she is."

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"Pete, do you know anything more about it?"

Gamez hesitated. It was barely a heartbeat, but it was there. "No," he said. "It happened a long time before me and Paula got married. What's Paula's accident got to do with this?"

"Maybe nothing—" There was a rap on the door, and Jena stepped in, followed by her mother. Both women were wearing jeans and sweatshirts. Paula was shorter than the twins, with the same willowy build. Her hair was dark and worn long, styled to keep the left side of her face in shadow. Her jaw on that side was awry, with a wine-stain scar on the hinge. It gave her mouth a permanent ironic twist. And an intermittent drip of saliva. She had one of her dogs, a chartreuse poodle, cradled in her arms.

"Jena told me Roddy's in trouble," Paula said. "Is it about what happened here before?"

"I don't know," Vic said, guiding her to the chair by his desk. "The police want to talk to a woman named Paulina Del Rio."

"I think Del Rio was my first husband's name. It sounds familiar."

"You mean you're not sure?" Vic said.

"No," she said, stroking her poodle, "but I'm not sure about many things. My mother would know. I can call her. My memory's like a Bingo card. Sometimes I win, mostly I don't. But I seem to remember this place. Things have been coming back to me in bits and pieces since we got here. Bad memories mostly. I got hurt here. This is where everything . . . turned ugly."

"The—the woman the sheriff is looking for used to work as a bearded lady," Vic said reluctantly.

"Then I must be the one he wants," Paula said. "Before I got the dogs I did acrobatics on horseback, the same act the twins do now. But sometimes I wore a beard in skits. I have a picture somewhere."

"Mom, maybe you're just confused because of Roddy," Jena said. "You shouldn't get involved in this."

"But I am involved," Paula said. "Roddy got in trouble for helping me before. Then he almost went to prison because I couldn't remember what happened. I can't let him down again. If the police want to see me, then I'll just have to try."

"Mrs. Gamez?" I said gently. "Do you know where Roddy was early this morning?"

"No. I sleep late on show days. I don't have much stamina. But I can say I saw him if it would help."

"No, lying for him would be a terrible mistake. Look, right now all the sheriff cares about is what happened this morning. Digging

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up the past won't help Roddy. It might even make things worse."

"Devlin's right, Mom," Jena said, glancing at me gratefully. "At least wait a day or two. The police may clear it up by then."

"All right," Paula said hesitantly, "I'll wait if you think it's the right thing to do. But I'm not leaving this place without Roddy."

"We won't, I promise," Jena said, taking her hand. "Come on, we'd better change. We've got another show to do." The two women walked out. Pete started after them, but Jeff blocked his path.

"Let them alone," he said quietly.

"Hey, she's my wife," Pete said. "I got a right to know what's goin' on."

"Maybe so," Jeff said evenly. "But right now Mom and Jena need some time alone. You let them be, or I may have to find out just how strong you really are, fat man."

"Hey, guys, cool down," Vic said, stepping between them.

"Butt out of our business, Maselli," Pete snapped. "This whole thing's your fault anyway."

"My fault?"

"You practically begged me to take this gig. Why? You figure on gettin' some free publicity for your two-bit show? Or maybe you're tryin' to bust up our act so you can pick up the pieces?"

"I didn't know anything about this," Vic protested. "I heard the story, sure. You can't be circus and not hear it. But I never really believed it, and I sure as hell didn't know it happened here or that Paula was the woman involved. I give you my word."

"And your dad's word," Pete said sarcastically. "You gimme that too?"

"What's my dad got to do with this?"

"You know what I'm talkin' about," Pete said suspiciously. "Just remember I'm not as green as these kids. I been around and I can handle myself. Now get outta my way, I got work to do." He shouldered Vic and Jeff aside and swaggered out.

"Jeff, you can't believe I knew anything about this," Vic pleaded.

"I don't give a damn one way or the other," Jeff snapped. "I just don't want my mother harassed by some hicktown hobby cop. Who's going to handle our animals while Roddy's in jail?"

"Devlin can fill in for Roddy. He's a bright guy, just tell him what to do. Only don't tell him anything you don't wanna see in print sometime," he added acidly. "It seems he's some kind of writer workin' our show undercover."

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"Vic?" Bobby Chingwa stuck his head in the office door. "Sorry to interrupt. Do you want me to start hiring a local crew to tear down the big top after the show?"

"No," Vic sighed, "you'd better wait. We'll shelter the animals in the big tent tonight, give 'em a break from the trailers. We may be here for a while."

"Whatever you say," Bobby said. "Hey, Dev, thanks for not yelling for help this morning. I woulda left you to die anyway, but the guilt would've bummed me out for hours."

"No problem," I said, "thanks for your concern."

"Come on, Devlin," Jeff said, "I'll fill you in."

"Go ahead, I'll meet you at the corral in twenty minutes," I said. "I want to get cleaned up and pop a couple of aspirin."

"Twenty minutes," Jeff said, and stalked out.

"What was that crack Pete made about your dad?" I asked Vic.

"Who knows with him?" Vic said bitterly. "Maybe he was trying to cover himself with Jeff, I don't know."

"What do you mean, cover himself?"

"For booking this tour and getting in this mess. When he asked for the headliner slot for the summer I fell all over myself to sign 'em. Carny spotted the twins a few years ago and told me to book 'em, but I had a full schedule at the time. A couple of months later they made the cover of *Circus Revue*. This picture here," he said, indicating the poster above his desk, an action shot of Jena and Jeff. "Carny hung it there as an 'I told you so,' but I didn't mind. She's really special, isn't she? But after that article, their price went up. I couldn't afford 'em. Until Pete called me and said he'd take the gig for whatever I could pay."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, and believe me, I didn't ask. He signed for Paula, so the twins went along with it, but they've been griping ever since. And now I'm wondering if he didn't plan the whole thing. Pete probably knew this town was on my venue when he signed on. Maybe he wanted to come here."

"How would he know your schedule in advance?"

"All the shows advertise their tours in the February *Circus Revue* magazine—dates, towns, the works. Acts who are interested send publicity info and I mix and match until we have a show for each town. But Pete called and asked for the whole summer."

"Don't you think the sheriff ought to know about this?"

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"Maybe," Vic said evenly, "but I'm not going to tell him. At least not yet. I can't afford to be the heavy in this, Dev."

"I don't understand."

"Yeah, well I'm not sure I do either. It's Jena. Maybe I stared at that poster over my desk too long, but spending time with her this summer has been the best thing that's happened to me in years. I know she's a lot younger than me, but we've got a lot in common too. She and Jeff can be great in this business, but not with Pete in charge. I've offered to give up my show to manage them. How will it look if I finger her stepfather?"

"It's my impression neither of the twins cares for him much."

"Maybe not, but he's Paula's husband, and Jena's devoted to her mom."

"And Roddy? Where does that leave him?"

"Look, if push comes to shove, I'll do the right thing by Roddy, you know that. I just hope like hell I won't have to."

"Yeah," I said, "me too."

"Sorry I'm late," I said, trotting up to Jeff at the corral.

"No problem. I needed the time to think anyway. Are you familiar with our act?"

"Only parts of it," I said. "I'm usually getting Eloise ready while you're on. What I've seen looks complicated."

"It is, but your part's simple enough. You bring the horses to the big-top entrance, we mount, and you trot us around center ring three times. We'll be doing some acrobatics, but you keep your eyes on the horses. Keep them parallel and for God's sake don't let them break stride or one of us could wind up in the stands. On the third circuit we jump to the bars and fly for the rest of the act. At the end, the ringmaster'll signal you. Bring the mares back in and hold them steady and we'll drop out of the air like butterflies. I hope. Now tell me what I said."

I repeated his instructions nearly word for word, and he nodded, satisfied. "Exactly right. You really are a bright guy. What was Vic saying about you being a writer?"

"I published a couple of books a few years ago," I acknowledged. "Neither one came close to being a bestseller. Tell me, why are Vic and Carny so angry about me being a writer?"

"Bad press." Jeff shrugged. "Reporters have oddball notions about circuses sometimes. And when we aren't weird enough for 'em, they make something up."

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"But I write fiction."

"So do they, they just don't admit it. But at least we know who they are."

"Touché. But I didn't take this job to write about it, and I certainly wouldn't trash anybody if I did."

"No offense, Devlin, but we've heard that song before. We're not freaks, and most of us value our privacy a great deal. I'd walk soft about this writing thing if I were you. Vic and Carny aren't the only ones who won't like it."

He was right. When I finally made it back to my trailer, Bobby Chingwa was sitting glumly on the steps, waiting for me.

"You don't even wanna look inside," he said. "It looks like King Kong had a seizure in there. Our bunks are dumped, food's tossed around."

"The police?" I asked.

"Nope, it's not messy enough," Bobby said, idly scratching his beard. "Near as I can tell nothing of mine's missing, but somebody stomped that little computer toy of yours to smithereens."

"It's not a toy," I said, stepping in to survey the damage. "It's a laptop. And it cost about as much as I've made all summer."

"No kidding? Jeez, I'm sorry, Dev. Anything else missing?"

"Just my notes," I said. "Three months' worth. Was anybody around when you got here?"

"Nah, Carny was over by the office trailer," Bobby said. "But I can't see him taking up burglary in his old age. These notes you're missing, does this mean I'm not gonna be famous?"

"Not unless you go back to a life of crime," I said. "And do a whole lot better at it."

"A life of crime's overrated," he said. "The work's interesting, but the fringe benefits suck. Kinda like the circus."

"Exactly like the circus," I said.

Roddy's arrest led the six o'clock local TV news: Circus Worker Held in Killing. Considering the newscasts, I was amazed we had any crowd at all. What we did have was an odd mix of teenyboppers, reporters, curiosity seekers, and probably a few undercover cops.

Oddly enough, the performers seemed to draw energy from the tension in the air. We only had five acts, but most of them doubled, so all three rings were busy all of the time. Acrobats in one ring would change costumes and stage names, and reappear in another ring as jugglers. Kubrick did a center-ring comedy turn with Ger-

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aldo, his dancing bear, then twenty minutes later he was back in ring left with a wig and stage makeup as Franz the Fire Breather. Pete and Paula Gamez appeared with their Amazing Pastel Poodles, then Pete returned alone as Monstro the world's strongest man.

And then it was my turn. I met Jena and Jeff at the center ring entrance ten minutes before showtime. They were wearing matching Lurex tights, but there was no trouble telling which was which. I held the mounts while Jena gentled them down, murmuring to them, slipping them a sugar cube apiece. And I wished I was fifteen years younger. Or that I was a horse.

Vic's amplified voice boomed over the PA system announcing the star attraction, the twins vaulted aboard their mounts from the rear, stood up on the platform saddles, and we were off.

I don't recall much of what happened in the first few minutes, I was too busy trying to keep pace with the horses without getting stomped. The mounts were uneasy at being led by a stranger, but they came through like troupers and by our second circuit of the ring, my stage jitters were fading and I was beginning to enjoy myself.

Behind me, Jeff and Jena were putting on a dazzling display of athletic ability, vaulting from mount to mount, spinning in midair as they jumped, then repeating the same feat from a handstand. Then Jeff did a backward somersault, landed upright, and without hesitating leapt straight upward and caught a trapeze bar. I led the mounts on their final circuit as Jeff pumped the trapeze back and forth above the ring, rapidly gaining height and speed. As the horses passed beneath him, Jena vaulted upward, Jeff caught her cleanly, then tossed her, spinning, to meet a second trapeze bar in midair.

It was such a spectacular stunt that I nearly ran into a ring post. Fortunately the horses knew the show and turned at the proper moment, leading me out the rear entrance behind the tent.

Inside, Jeff and Jena were winning over the surly crowd, earning more applause than all of the previous acts combined. I sensed a presence beside me, turned, and was staring into the narrow yellow eyes of Geraldo the Dancing Bear. Ben Kubrick tugged his leash and Geraldo backed meekly away from the horses and sat down on his haunches like an obedient pup.

"They're really something, aren't they?" Kubrick said, watching the twins soar high above the crowd. No net, and apparently no fear. "They're booked in Europe for the winter, you know. Circus Marche. Only half a step down from the big shows in Paris and

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Vegas. And they'll be ready for those soon. Hell, they probably are now. I can't believe they're even on this tour."

"Why not?"

"Nothing against Vic, but his show's strictly low-rent. I only signed on for the August dates because I hoped one of the big shows'd be scouting the Traberts and spot me too."

"But if it's so low-rent, why did the twins take the gig?"

"Jeff told me it was Pete's idea. Most likely he's trying to keep himself and Paula working. If the twins split for Europe, Pete'll be out of luck unless they keep him on as manager. The big shows don't book poodle acts."

"So what'll happen to Pete and Paula?"

"Who knows? The only time Paula seems really happy is when she's onstage. She taught the kids their act, but they don't need her now and neither of them can stand Pete. God knows Paula's no prize with her face the way it is, but I still can't believe she married that jerk. No wonder the twins are so hot to split for Europe."

"To get away from Pete?" I said.

Ben nodded. "And maybe the bearded-lady stories. Must be tough hearing an ugly joke, knowing it's about your mother."

"How do you know about it?"

"I heard Carny mention it to somebody, and put two and two together. Most circus folks have heard the story. I imagine the twins guessed the truth a long while back, even if no one told them. They're sharp, those two, and they think so much alike it's scary sometimes. You'd better get ready," Kubrick said, glancing at his watch. "You're back on in a minute."

"Right," I said, still mulling over what he'd said. Out in the tent the ringmaster's amplified voice was announcing the grand finale. I steadied the horses, took a deep breath, and trotted back into the tent.

As I led one of the ponies from the petting corral to the big top for the night, a burly figure stepped out of the shadows, blocking my path. Pete.

"Hold on, Professor, I want to talk to you."

"What's on your mind, Mr. Gamez? I've got work to do."

"It can wait. Nobody's goin' anyplace till the cops clear this thing up anyways. And call me Pete, everybody does."

"Do they? Funny, a few weeks ago you told me to call you Mr. Gamez. Mr. Gamez."

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"Lighten up, Teach, we ain't on different sides here. How'd you like to take a few extra bucks back to school with you?"

"A few bucks for what?" I asked, curious.

"A little information. See, I figure Vic's tryin' to set me up to take the fall for this jam Roddy's got himself in."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he's got the hots for Jena. Anybody can see that. He wants me out of the way so he can take over our act. Look, Vic was the one who brought us here. I never woulda booked his flea-bit tour on my own. Vic's dad called me last spring, said Vic was in trouble, needed a headline act to bail out his show."

"Vic's father contacted you?"

"Yeah, the old guy sounded pretty upset on the phone, so I figured I'd help him out. We're all circus, you know?"

"No, I don't know. Why would you take this job as a favor? Are you and Vic's dad friends?"

"Nah, I never met him, but . . . Okay, just between us guys, he cabled me some cash up front. A signing bonus. But he said not to tell anybody about it, let Vic keep his pride."

"I see. So as a favor to this guy you never met, you didn't tell Paula and the twins about the . . . bonus money?"

"Make fun if you want, but Paula's got no head for figures or much else, and those brats of hers are still green as grass. Somebody's gotta be in charge."

"Maybe so. What do you want from me, Gamez?"

"A little help is all, one hand washes the other. You're in and outta the office trailer all the time. Vic musta wrote somethin' down about this, about his dad talkin' to me or something. You look around, and if you turn something up I'll pay you for it."

"No," I said slowly, "I don't think I could do that."

"Why not? You so rich you can't use a couple extra bucks?"

"No, I'm just not very good at snooping in other people's business."

"But I just made this your business. And if the money ain't reason enough, I can give ya another one real quick. You understand what I'm sayin' to you?" He moved toward me, his massive fists clenched, and I suddenly realized how alone we were in the shadows. And how big he really was. "I used to bust up people for a livin', Teach. You think bein' educated makes you bulletproof or somethin'?"

"Hey girls, what's the holdup?" Bobby Chingwa stepped out of the shadows behind Pete. His silvery hair and beard seemed to glow in the overhead lights like a halo. A rescuing angel. "Hey, you guys

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wanna give me a hand with the canvas? It's supposed to blow tonight and the tent needs bracin'."

"How about you fold that tent sideways and stick it where the sun don't shine, Chingwa. Take off. Me and the professor got business."

"Actually, I think we've covered everything, Mr. Gamez," I said, edging past him. "I'll be right with you, Bobby."

"How about it, Pete?" Bobby asked. "Wanna help out?"

"Screw you, Chingwa. Screw botha you." Pete wheeled and stalked off.

Bobby shrugged. "Even-tempered fella, isn't he? Hundred percent surly. You havin' a problem with him?"

"A small one. He thinks this jam Roddy's in is some kind of a plot against him."

"How's he figure that?"

"He thinks Vic's trying to squeeze him out. Said Vic's dad conned him into signing on the tour."

"That'd be a heckuva con job," Bobby said, "considering Vic's dad's been in the ground about ten years. Carny told me the old man died years ago."

"Are you serious?"

"It isn't the kinda thing Carny usually jokes about."

"No," I said. "I guess not. Come on, I'll give you a hand with the tent."

Bobby grinned. "Nah, I don't need any help. I just figured the way Pete was settin' himself you needed an interruption. Besides, Jeff split for town with a fairground flower, so you've got his animals to take care of plus the zoo and Eloise. And when it comes to cleaning up after elephants, you're on your own, white man."

"Hey," I said, "after the day I've had, shoveling elephant crap'll be a vacation."

The storm broke around nine that night, a late August drencher up from the great plains. It thundered on the canvas of the big top like a thousand drummers. The smaller animals, the ponies and goats, seemed to take the weather in stride, munching stolidly on wisps of hay, or nuzzling each other or dozing. The twins' milk-white mounts were edgier, stamping their hooves, moving around in the makeshift rope stalls. Even Eloise was restless, shifting her enormous weight from side to side, rocking herself into a stupor. I tried talking to her to settle her down, but she swatted at me with her trunk, and I moved off. I can take a hint.

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I finished bedding the animals down by ten, then waited around the tent, hoping for a break in the rain and mulling over the day.

Why would anyone smash my laptop and steal my notes? Spite? Or something else? Both Carny and Vic had reacted angrily to what they saw as a betrayal of trust, but I couldn't imagine either of them being vindictive enough to vandalize my trailer.

The problem was, no one else knew about it. I'd been discreet about my writing, working at night when I was alone, so except for the people in the office when Vic had warned Jeff about me . . .

It still made no sense. At least the notes weren't gone forever, except for what I'd written the past few days. The rest of it would be waiting for me at the end of summer.

And I was ready now for my summer to end. A part of me had been dreading it. I'd had a wonderful time and met some fascinating characters. Perhaps I'd even found what I was looking for when I signed on.

A different life. Jeff and Jena risking their necks in every show, pushing their skills and luck to the limit for an audience they'd never see again. Paula soldiering on, still needing the applause in spite of the hell she'd gone through. Or perhaps because of it. Vic and Carny and Bobby Chingwa, as different as people could be, and yet comrades in arms. And Roddy, murmuring to the horses in a language they seemed to understand. And me. I'd shoveled elephant crap, seen a lot of towns, had some great late-night bull sessions, and even tackled a cop. Maybe I wasn't such a boring stiff after all.

One of the goats bleated a complaint. Apparently I was keeping them awake. I checked my watch. Nearly eleven. And the rain was still thundering on the canvas.

Unless I wanted to spend the night in here I'd have to make a run for it. I wrapped an empty trash bag around my shoulders, stepped out into the downpour, and trotted toward my trailer.

I never got there. As I high-stepped it across the grounds trying to dodge the puddles, I glimpsed a movement in the shadows. And then a flashlight beam caught me full in the face.

"Hold it right there," Deputy Meadows said. "Devlin? What are you doing out here?"

"Trying to get out of the rain," I said. "What's going on?"

"A raid," Sheriff Zeebow said, moving out of the shadows. "Meadows, have everyone hold their positions. Devlin, you're with me. Let's go."

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Zeebow grasped my arm and led me back under the big top out of the rain. "All right," he said, turning to face me, "I want some straight answers out of you and I want 'em fast. Why were you wandering around out there in the dark?"

"I wasn't wandering around. I bedded the animals down for the night, then hung around awhile for the rain to stop. I was just heading back to my trailer."

"You've been out here for the past few hours? Can anyone vouch for that?"

"Not unless you can get one of the goats to testify. Why?"

He stared at me a moment without answering, then slowly shook his head. "You know, I'm almost sorry. I really liked the idea of you being involved in this. I thought maybe you played head games on that poor bastard I've got back in jail until he got so mixed up he actually killed somebody."

"That's crazy. Why would I do something like that?"

"Maybe just to prove you could. People have been killed for less. But you really aren't involved, are you? Because you don't have an alibi."

"Why should I need one? What's happened?"

"Jack Welch, my deputy, was killed a little over an hour ago. Shot to death in his apartment. And we found another steel tent stake at the scene."

"My God," I said softly. My knees suddenly felt wobbly and I eased down on a hay bale. "But . . . Roddy's still in jail, isn't he?"

"That's right. In fact, I was probably questioning him myself around the time Welch was killed, a little after nine o'clock. When you were here. Alone, right?"

"That's right," I said, swallowing. "You can't think I had something to do with this?"

"No," Zeebow said, "not anymore. I'm fairly certain I know who did it. In fact, you gave me the idea yourself."

"*I* gave it to you? How?"

"You asked me how Roddy found Keenan so quickly. After talking to him I just couldn't believe Rodman was bright enough to figure all this out on his own, but I couldn't get him to implicate anyone else. Not even you."

"That's a comfort," I said.

"So I tried working backwards. I checked the court records of the original bearded-lady assault case, and found there'd been a freedom of information inquiry about it eight months ago. By a private inves-

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tigator from Detroit. I contacted him. He was a little reluctant at first, but when I offered to charge him as an accessory to murder he told me what I wanted to know."

"Which was?"

"He said he'd been hired to locate the assailants in the case. He got Welch and Keenan's names from the court records and ran down their current addresses. He even drove to Catawpha and got photographs of them. He assumed it was for a lawsuit. He was wrong."

"Who hired him?"

"That's the sixty-four-dollar question, isn't it? By the way, I read your book today, *Poets and Promises?"*

"You read my book?" I echoed, surprised.

"Just parts of it. I didn't have time to read it all. I was hoping to get an idea of how your mind works, wondering if you might be involved in this."

"And what did you decide?"

"That you're one of those modern types who likes to keep things murky. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I prefer happy endings. No loose strings. Like this case."

"How do you mean?"

"The key to this case is the woman, the bearded lady, Paulina Del Rio. She is with this show, isn't she?"

I nodded, reluctantly.

"But with a new name. Paula Gamez. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"So other than the lady herself, and I doubt a woman could have handled Keenan, the person with the most likely motive is her husband, Pete Gamez. Maselli tells me that Gamez asked to be included on the tour, knowing it would be playing this town. And the investigator said Pete Gamez hired him to locate Keenan and Welch. You see? A neat ending. And one you're not a part of."

"Why not?"

"Because if you and Gamez were in this together, he'd be out here now. You'd alibi each other. But you don't have an alibi. So for the moment you're clear. Where's Gamez now?"

"I don't know. In his motor home, I guess."

"Which one is it?"

"The big gray one down on the end, near the horse trailer."

"Okay, if I were you I'd keep my head down for the next few minutes. Welch was shot with his own weapon and we didn't find it at the scene. Gamez may still be armed."

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"Wait a minute, Zeebow. Earlier tonight Pete told me he thought Vic might be setting him up, and Vic admitted that he wants to take over the twins' act."

"He's definitely interested in half of the act. He and Jena Trabert were together all evening. They had dinner and drinks after the show in a restaurant with about fifty other people. So as the circus emcee says, sit back, relax, and enjoy the show."

"Ringmaster," I said.

"Pardon?"

"In circuses he's called a ringmaster, not an emcee. And by the way, there's a reason I don't write happy endings. I don't believe in them. You seldom see them in real life."

He eyed me for a moment, then nodded. "Come to think of it, I guess you don't. I'll keep it in mind, Professor." He stepped out into the rain, collected three of his men, and trotted down to the motor home Pete and Paula shared.

Pete blearily answered the knock; they cuffed him and led him off to a patrol car. Then Paula stepped out, wearing a bathrobe and a shower cap, while the police searched the motor home. She looked confused, so I trotted over and brought her back to the big top, out of the rain.

She took off the cap and shook her hair loose to cover her twisted jaw. Then she wandered over to Jena's mare and began stroking its nose.

"I have some Irish coffee in my thermos if you'd like some," I offered.

"Thank you," she said. "Do you know what's going on? The police asked Pete about a man named Welch. I remember him, I think. From before. Did he have red hair?" She seemed unnaturally calm and self-possessed.

"That's right." I passed her the cup of coffee and she sucked it down greedily. A trickle of brown seeped from the crooked corner of her jaw. She daubed at it with the sleeve of her bathrobe.

"Sorry," she said, "my mouth doesn't work quite right. This Welch, is he dead? Like the other one?"

"Apparently so," I said.

"And they think Pete had something to do with it? My God."

"Didn't he?"

She cocked her head and glanced up at me. "You can't be serious. Pete never did anything for anyone but himself in his life. And that strong-man act of his is all bluff. He couldn't kill anyone."

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"Not even for you? You're his wife."

"I'm his meal ticket," she said flatly. "And he's mine. I married him because I thought the children needed a strong father figure in their lives. Sometimes my judgment doesn't work any better than my jaw. And for the same reason. Do you think the police will hold him for long?"

"That depends," I said. "Was he with you tonight?"

"I honestly can't say," she said. "I take pills to sleep. That elephant could probably crawl in beside me and I might not know it."

"So you can't swear he was there?"

"No," she said, meeting my eyes with a glance that showed surprising shrewdness. "Pete's always reminding me how undependable my memory is when he takes money out of my purse or pawns something of mine. Maybe having a faulty memory has an upside. If they hold Pete, they'll have to let Roddy go, won't they?"

"I guess so."

"Well, at least the horses will be taken care of. I swear the twins would let them drop dead in their stalls before they'd get their hands dirty. Are the police through at our place?"

I glanced out the tent flap. "I think so. Their cars are leaving."

"Then I might as well go back to bed," she said, giving the mare a final pet. "Thanks for the coffee. Will we move on tomorrow, do you think?"

"I expect so. Aren't you going to wait for Pete?"

"No, I've got to get out of this place. Every minute we stay here is an agony for me. I keep remembering more and more of what happened. What those pigs did to me." She shook her head, trying to clear it. "And that's not the worst of it. You know what the worst is? I've been getting flashes of what my life was like before they . . . hurt me. What it was like to look in a mirror without wincing. Or to talk to someone without wondering if I'm drooling on myself. I used to wear a false beard in part of my act. Now sometimes I wish the beard was real and the rest of my life was an act. I'd better go," she said abruptly. "I'll see you, Devlin."

"Hang on a second," I said. "Let me get a plastic bag for you. . . ." And then I stopped.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's . . . what you just said. You're right, you know. This whole thing is an act. But you're not one of the performers. You're the audience. Or maybe the twins are."

"What do you mean?"

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"The killings. If someone wanted Keenan and Welch dead, he could have done it anytime and likely gotten away with it. No one would have connected it to the circus after all these years. But the ringmaster for this show wanted it connected. That's why he left the stakes behind. He wants you to know why it's happening. That's why he brought you here."

"But Pete brought us here. He booked this job."

"I'm not so sure he did. Someone claiming to be Vic's father paid Pete under the table to book this tour. And that same person hired an investigator to locate Keenan and Welch."

"But the police said Pete did that."

"No, Pete may be a jerk, but he's not stupid. If he set this up, why would he give the investigator his own name? He could have hired him the same way he claims he was paid off. A phone call, a money order for cash. No way to trace anything. No, it's someone else. And I think you know who it is. You must."

She met my eyes for a moment, but I doubt she saw me. She was somewhere else. Far away. "Do you know what I did a few hours ago?" she said quietly. "I wanted to help Roddy, so I called the rest home where my mother stays to ask about my first married name. And the nurse who answered told me Mom died in nineteen eighty-eight. I'd forgotten. It was like hearing it for the first time. Can you even imagine what that felt like?"

I didn't answer.

"You can't," she said, her eyes brimming. "My whole life is like that. A constant, ugly surprise. So even if you're right, and I am the audience for this . . . show. If I knew who your ringmaster is, do you think I'd tell you? Or tell anyone? Would you tell?"

"I don't know," I said honestly.

"Well I wouldn't," she said. "I don't know who's doing this, but if I did, I think I'd applaud. I think I'd stand up and cheer, and clap until my hands bled." She turned and fled into the night, clutching her faded bathrobe around her throat.

I watched her go, a tall woman with a smashed face, a smashed life, running in the rain with surprising grace. She must have been truly lovely before it happened. Probably looked a lot like . . .

And that was it. That was the loose end to this thing. And I was fairly sure I knew where it was.

It took nearly five minutes of pounding on the office trailer door before Carny answered. He was bleary and rumpled and smelled like he'd been using vodka as an aftershave. "What's wrong, Dev?"

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"Nothing, I just need to use the phone. Go back to bed, I'll let myself out." He grunted and shambled back to his cot at the rear of the office. I dialed the number by memory.

"Mmmmph?"

"Berniece? It's Tom. Look, I know it's late, but I'm in trouble and I need a favor. I want you to go down to the den, switch on my computer, then call me back at this number, okay?"

There is one small advantage to having an ex-wife who thinks you're a stiff. Berniece knew I'd never call her in the middle of the night unless it was truly important. She did as I asked with no complaints, no questions. There'd be a price for her help of course, but the bill would come later.

I sat in the office, reading my stolen notes as they came back over Vic's fax line a page at a time. I'd been sending them home via modem every few weeks all summer. Another advantage to being stuffy. I'm a stickler for details, a place for everything, everything in its place.

It was odd reading them again in the faint glow of the desk lamp. Thoughts and feelings collected over my circus summer. First impressions of the people in the show, meeting the twins, my aches and pains and . . . There it was. A late-night bull session with Vic, Carny, Bobby Chingwa, and Jeff. About love. About the stupidest things we'd ever done for love.

Vic told them why I'd signed on for the summer, which everyone thought was hilarious, especially since we'd killed most of a fifth of a single-malt scotch. Jeff claimed he'd never done anything stupid for love and never would. I believed him.

Carny said he'd once fallen in heat with an amiable widow, whose husband wasn't quite as dead as she'd claimed. And when it was Bobby's turn, he told us about something that had happened in prison. . . . About seeing a picture.

And that was it. I tilted the desk lamp to light up the poster Carny'd made of Jena and Jeff on the cover of *Circus Revue*. It was an action shot, quite grainy. But Jena was clear enough. She glowed like circus royalty, a princess on horseback. Looking very much like Paula must have, years before.

Except for one thing. I took a pencil and defaced the picture. And transformed Jena into a bearded lady. And there it was. I stuffed the magazine cover under my jacket, switched off the desk lamp, and started for the door. But then I hesitated.

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I knew Vic kept a pistol in the bottom drawer of his desk behind some ledgers. I'm no firearms expert, but in my lost youth I did a hitch in the army. I found the gun, a Browning .380, checked the clip, then racked a round in the chamber and set the safety. Carny snored peacefully through it all. I doubt he'd have awakened if I'd fired the damned thing. I slipped the gun into my jacket pocket and stepped out into the rain.

The motor of the canvas truck was idling. Not unusual; Bobby often ran it for heat when he slept in the cab. And he usually kept the windows partly open, even in the rain. But they were closed now. And he wasn't asleep. He was behind the wheel. I rapped on the door and he rolled his window down.

"Yo, Bobby, I need to talk to you, okay?" I swung myself up the cab steps without waiting for permission, opened the doors, and slid into the passenger's seat. Bobby eyed me without comment.

"You see what happened to Pete?" I asked.

"No, I've been asleep. Something happen?"

"The police busted him and hauled him off."

"No kidding? You mean for the killing?"

"That's right. Quite a surprise. I never would've figured him for it."

"Why not? Paula's his wife."

"That's what I mean. Nothing against Paula, but she's not exactly pin-up girl material, you know?"

He glanced at me, his face unreadable in the glow of the dashboard dials. "Maybe he cares about her more than he lets on."

"I doubt it. She told me tonight he steals from her sometimes. And that he'd never thought of anyone but himself in his life. She sounded pretty unhappy."

"Sorry to hear it," Bobby said. "So?"

"So doesn't it bother you?"

"Why should it?"

"I thought circus people looked out for each other. And you've been in circuses a long time, right? You must have been, to know a trade like yours."

"I've been with circuses awhile. I've also done hard time. And in the house of many doors, rule number one is mind—" he winced, catching his breath. "Mind your own business."

"Are you all right?" I asked. "You don't look so good."

"I . . . feel a little rocky," he admitted. "Probably just catching a cold. All this rain. I'd better call it a night. I'll see you tomorrow, Dev."

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"No," I said slowly. "I don't think you will. I think you're going to run for it tonight, Bobby. You set this thing up really well, conning Pete into signing up for this tour, using his name to hire a detective to find the men who attacked Paula. But it won't hold up for long and you know it. That detective won't identify Pete as the man who hired him, he'll pick you. Or your picture, since you'll be long gone. Am I right?"

He didn't even blink. He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. And in the millisecond my guard was down, an ugly little automatic appeared in his palm. Aimed straight at my midsection. "You must be carryin'," he said softly, "or you'd never've gotten in here. Take out the piece, put it on the dash. And don't do anything stupid."

He said it without opening his eyes. But in the cab he wouldn't have to see me to blow me in half. I eased Vic's pistol out of my coat and laid it on the dashboard. Bobby picked it up and slid it into his belt. "You've got exactly five seconds to tell me what you know."

"I don't actually know all that much," I said. "I figured a few things out, guessed at others. Like this." I slid the poster out of my jacket and laid it on the dash. He eyed it a moment without comment, then shook his head. "A bearded lady."

"That's right. She looks so much like Paula you don't see her resemblance to you. Unless you add the beard. The hair color threw me at first. The twins are blond, so I assumed their father was too, since Paula isn't. But the color isn't natural, is it? They're bottle blondes. Their actual hair color is probably as dark as yours was once. They're your children, aren't they?"

"How did you guess?"

"You told us a story one night, about seeing a picture of an old lover while you were in jail. But when you looked her up after you got out, the picture was of her daughter, and she didn't remember you anyway."

"I had too much scotch that night or I never woulda said anything," Bobby said, his eyes still closed. "Still, I didn't think it mattered, until I found out you were a writer. Then I figured you might be keeping notes, and sure enough, it was in there."

"It was, but I doubt I would have made the connection if you hadn't taken my notes. But maybe I would have. Something in your voice that night. . . . I knew there was more to the story."

"Not much. I kept that picture in my cell, looked at it every day for nearly two years. I knew it was Jena, but she looks so much like

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Paula that it brought it all back. I realized that running out on Paula, leaving her pregnant with the twins, was the biggest mistake of my life, the place where it all went wrong. But if I could just go back, try again, I could change things somehow, make it all turn out different for both of us. Only when I got there, everything was . . . smashed. Her face, her life, even her memory. And an ugly joke I'd been hearing for years was about someone I loved. There was no going back. All I could do was . . . offer some kind of justice."

"Murder? Is that your idea of justice?"

"I gave 'em both a fair shake, one on one, which is a helluva lot more than they gave Paula."

"A fair shake? Zeebow said Welch was shot to death."

"That's right," Bobby said, closing his eyes again. "With his own damned gun. I knew he'd be armed, so I wore a flak jacket under my coat. He put three rounds into my chest before I took the gun away from him. Shoulda known a jerk like him would carry a cannon. A forty-four magnum. Even with the vest on I think he busted me up pretty good."

"Bobby, if he shot you, you're going to need a doctor."

"Or what? I could die? Well so can you, Dev. I like you, but I'll tell you somethin' true, I'd rather die than go back inside. And I don't much care if I die alone or you come along for company. Understand?"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Drive," he said. "We can make the Canadian line at Windsor in a few hours. If I can get into Canada, maybe I can make it all the way to Cree country. It's not much of a chance, but it's all I've got. And all you've got too. Because I can't very well leave you here, can I?"

"No," I said. "I guess not."

I figured the run to the border at Windsor would take a little over three hours. It seemed like a lifetime, rain all the way. But during the last fifty miles, I noticed that Bobby was beginning to nod. His head would drop slightly, then a few moments later he'd blink awake. As we rumbled through the low rolling hills east of Detroit, the intervals of sleep, if that's what they were, seemed to be growing longer. I tried to time them by counting the seconds silently, a minute, then a minute and a half. A freeway sign said DETROIT 36 MILES, and I knew I'd have to do something soon. The stop-and-go driving of the city would jolt him awake. I didn't know what he

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meant to do with me when we reached the border, but I knew he wouldn't try to take me across with him.

And then he made the decision for me. About twenty miles outside Romulus he seemed to drop into a deeper doze than before. Perhaps he'd passed out. I couldn't be sure, and it didn't matter.

I gradually slowed the truck, straining to keep the engine drone as constant as I could to keep from snapping him out of his stupor. Fifty, forty-five, thirty. My hands were slick with sweat. I could barely manage to unfasten my seat belt. I continued to let the engine drag reduce our speed. The gun was on his lap, and he seemed to be holding it very loosely. I thought about making a grab for it. But it was too far to reach, for my arm, and my heart.

At twenty-five miles per hour, Bobby groaned and stirred, coming groggily awake. And for a split second our eyes met. And then I popped the door open. And jumped.

Twenty miles an hour is a helluva lot faster than it looks. The ground slammed into me as if I'd fallen from a roof, and then I was skidding along the gravel shoulder of the road out of control until I tumbled over the edge of an embankment and slid down into a ditch. And smashed face first into water.

It probably saved my life. The muddy ditch absorbed my fall and the water shocked me awake. I could hear the shriek of rubber behind me as Bobby fought to bring the truck under control. I scrambled across the ditch and clawed my way up the other side, trying to get as far from the road as I could before he could stop.

I came out in an open field, a sea of mud that sucked at my ankles with every step. I could only manage a drunken, stumbling dogtrot. I slogged desperately through the mire, pushing myself until my chest was on fire and my legs were rubber, and still I kept on. Until I stumbled over something in the dark, twisted my ankle, and went down hard.

I lay in the muck, chest heaving, my ankle ablaze with pain. Then I forced myself to roll over and look back the way I'd come. But there was nothing to see. In the misty drizzle I just couldn't tell how far I was from the road, or whether the truck had run into the ditch or had driven on. Or if Bobby had stopped it and was coming after me.

I staggered to my feet and limped blindly on.

After a while, maybe twenty minutes, maybe an hour, I saw a light ahead. A house? No, a barn at the edge of the field, with a

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halogen security light over the door. If there was a farmhouse anywhere nearby, I couldn't see it through the rain.

The barn door was padlocked, but there was a shovel leaning against the side of the building. I pried the hasp off, stepped inside, and found the light switch.

Stock barn. Rows of stalls, with cattle and a few sheep. There was a toolroom with buckets and pitchforks and feed barrels. But no office. No telephone.

I knew I should push on immediately, the farmhouse might not be too far off. But which way? My ankle was on fire and I was too exhausted to think straight. I eased down on a pile of straw, my back against the wall, and tried to think.

Bobby. If he'd kept on he'd be at the border soon. Might be there already. Would he get through? Maybe. Zeebow thought Pete was his man. He'd have no reason to notify the border authorities. Only I could do that. If I could get to a phone.

I leaned back, trying to stay focused, to concentrate. But the rain was drumming on the roof, and the animals were shifting and rustling in the night. I closed my eyes. Just for a moment.

And gradually the night noises became the murmur of a vast unseen audience, a Sunday crowd under a big top. And the distant thunder was the rumble of hoofbeats, drawing closer.

And a lady, tall and lithe, came charging into the center ring, standing upright on the back of a white Arabian mare. And I knew it must be Paula, because she was wearing a glittering metallic beard. A bearded lady. And as her mare circled the ring, she bowed to her audience, and waved like a queen.

She shouted Hup! and the mare wheeled and charged toward the trapeze bar swinging high overhead. The lady crouched, setting herself, and threw the beard aside . . .

But she wasn't Paula. Or at least not the woman I knew. Her mouth was straight and firm, and her eyes were alive, glistening with excitement. She was beautiful, as lovely as the woman Bobby had dreamt of all those nights in his cell.

And just before she made her suicidal leap for that gleaming bar, she smiled at me. And blew me a kiss.

I knew that I was dreaming, that I should wake up and try to find a phone. But it was warm in the barn, and the scent of hay was sweet. So I nestled deeper into the straw, and went back to my dream circus. Maybe the rain would stop soon, and I could see things more clearly. I could find a phone then. Yes. That's what I would do. I'd find a phone. In the morning. After the rain. ●

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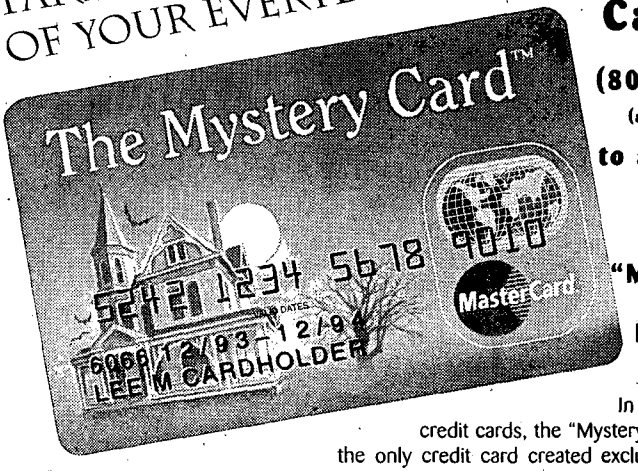

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